MAD MAX 2
When all that's left is one last chance, pray that he's still out there... somewhere!

Written by Terry Hayes
George Miller
and Brain Hannant

Novelization by Carl Ruhen

A QB Book

1981

# MAD MAX 2

**Starring** Mel Gibson
**in a** Kennedy Miller **Production**
**Produced by** Byron Kennedy
**Directed by** George Miller
**Written by** Terry Hayes/George Miller
**with** Brian Hannant

A QB Book

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## CHAPTER ONE

Max roves, Max ranges. It is all he can do now, this gaunt, hollow-eyed man, he and the machine and the dog, which is all he has left in the world that is crumbling all around him, burning up the highways, through the dust and the stinging flurries of sand that is whipped by the hot wind against the windscreen of his black-on-black pursuit car, which bears the scars of the many times he has had to beat back the bands of marauders attracted by the fuel he is carrying in his tanks.

The machine and the dog—and his memories. The sun's fierce heat pounds relentlessly down on the baking earth. Beneath the shimmering heat, the clusters of rocks seem as if they are in constant motion. Mirages seem to float upwards out of the beating heat. Images form, a face, faces, people and planes, parachutes dropping from the sky which then becomes a deep, thundering black, black and purple, and shot through with searing flames.

The wasteland is tinged with red. It is strangely beautiful. Like the end of the earth, the sun large in the sky, and all life having shrivelled away to nothing. Max drives fast, but the thoughts keep crowding in, glimpses, flashes, there's no way to escape them, no matter how much you put on the speed—like there's no way to escape the marauders, the vultures, bloodsuckers, and all along the highways, into the fields where they have been chased, littering creek beds, there they are, the smashed, rusting, burnt out hulks of the vehicles that have fallen prey to them.

The heat plays tricks on the eyes, which are heavy and gritty through lack of sleep and the effort of concentration, the necessity not to let the guard drop for a single moment. But one thrives on this energy, borrowed and stored away in the system—one just

goes, and goes, and goes.

A woman's face, sleepy, smiling, flushed with the lovemaking that has just ended, a voice murmuring in his ear, a baby crying . . . Jesus, *no!* Foot down on the pedal, the engine roaring, and the countryside spinning past, a monotonous sameness about it, hills and gulches, all red, so barren. Yes, one just keeps on going, one couldn't stay still, no place to settle, the search was going on all the time. No end to it.

It's funny when you think about it, the way—the manner—in which the world is ending. Cataclysmic, the way everyone expected it would, somehow—but still funny. It had to happen, and it is happening, the population has scattered everywhere, and the cities—see the cities now—are crumbling and slowly falling apart. The decay has set in, and there is nothing that can be done to stop it, even if the will were there. The cities are nothing more than shells now—towering monuments to futility. Perhaps it is funny, this thing that is happening now, while Max forages, because people had actually believed in the *permanence* of things, that it go on and on the way it was, and they could put up buildings—glittering spires—that reached higher and higher, that they could reach for and conquer the universe. Perhaps it was the smugness of those days that made it funny. Maybe there was bitter humor to be found in panic, in looting, death and wholesale destruction.

Even when all the signs were there; and the satellites beamed the flickering images into every household—those images of confrontation and conflagration, the screaming hordes that swept all before them, the blazing buildings, the execution squads, the assassinations, and all other forms of violence that had taken on a comfortable domestic aspect—there was still no reason to believe that a stand-off wouldn't be reached just this side of the brink, a brief defusing hiatus, a withdrawal within a continued state of hostility, a problem never, never to be solved, because there just was no solution. It was like the surf, rolling in, drawing back, the one motion complementing the other, a law of nature. It was inconceivable that the tide wouldn't ebb, that the moon wouldn't continue to wield its timeless influence. But no, not this time . . .

It was the fuel that mattered. Banknotes fluttered in the streets of those silent cities. They were caught in drifts, piled up in gutters, against walls and in doorways. The wind caught them and sent them in flurries across the open ground, across squares and plazas, and the parks which had become veritable jungles by now. And

gold—stockpiled, forgotten, useless. Only the fuel. The institutions had gone—the banks, stock exchanges, those great corporations that had spread their tentacles across the globe, those great palaces of glass and marble, deserted now, dank and crumbling mausoleums.

“Max, there’s something bothering you. You’ve hardly said a word all night.”

A distant voice, a smile, flickering candlelight. What was it? A celebration?

“Just tired, I guess, honey. Nothing wrong. I’m all right.”

The way the light caught Jessie’s hair, a gentle rippling of soft light every time she moved her head. Pure gold. A smile hovering, a stirring of desire.

“I don’t believe you, Max. You can’t fool me. You never have been able to fool me. I can see you’re worried.”

Her eyes shining. Everything about Jessie shone. “Why should I be worried?” How unconvincing it sounded, a hollow voice. “I’ve got you and Sprog—the three of us—that’s all I care about. As long as I have you. And the kid.”

Jessie frowning, her voice low and serious as she abstractedly stirs her coffee, the spoon going round and round, making small chinking sounds against the side of the cup. “There’s been talk.”

“What sort of talk?”

“Disturbing talk. About you. About your life expectancy. You know, there’s a book being run. It’s odds on that you won’t last a week.”

But he had, and the week after that, and the weeks, and months and years, so many years after that—he was the one who had lasted. He was the only one left, and frankly, there were times when he wished he wasn’t.

The contented roar of the powerful engine, hands loose on the steering wheel, and a cloud of dust rising behind him as he sped through the weird, arid country, with its isolated outcrops of rock, the dried riverbeds, the clumps of saltbush and spinifex.

Proclamations, declarations, the lines of cars that stretched and

stretched, the queues that grew longer each day to soak up what remained of the fast-evaporating fuel supplies, the cost of which rocketed and rocketed until it seemed that no amount of money was enough to purchase a single gallon of that very limited stock that had not already been commandeered for the essential services, which were fast breaking down in any case. The outbreaks of fighting in the streets had become steadily less sporadic. The mobs had surged this way and that, a devouring monster that destroyed everything in its path turned loose. Factories had ground to a standstill, useless now, the starved machinery choking in rust.

And back further, to the time of the Nightrider, the Toecutter—names now, nothing more—the screech of tyres, and the Toecutter's bike hurling itself between the front wheels of the huge road rig that had come lumbering up over a rise in the road, and the Toecutter still conscious under the grille until the second the sump guard ripped his head and shoulders off at the chest. The Toecutter had paid for what he had done—done to Jessie and Sprog—he and the others, but even so, Max had felt he had been cheated in some way. The Toecutter hadn't deserved to die as quickly as he had, no way, and even that split-second of awareness that remained to him after his bike slewed in beneath those gigantic wheels wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

The past rolled into the present, and the present rolled into the future. Sometimes it was difficult to disentangle them. Movement. Ceaseless movement, on and on . . . and shit, there wasn't a future. Why think about a future? All the lights had long been turned off.

Max is not alone on this stretch of road. At what precise point he realised he was not alone on this stretch of road, he can't be sure. His instincts, being what they are, so highly tuned, must have registered the movement, a new element in the composition of the red landscape, maybe even before his eyes had picked it up. Something different, an alarm bell triggered. But now he can see them, clearly now, burning up the road behind him, steadily gaining on him, specks at first, tiny black specks materialising through the shimmering heat behind him, growing larger, looming, gradually taking on form and substance. Three of them. They have picked up his scent—the scent of fuel, another tank to be drained, another metal carcase to be systematically dismembered. The supercharger roars, brute power unrestrained. Ah . . .

He can see them now in the mirror, make out what they look like. There are three vehicles behind him, closing up the distance. One of

them, a big powerful bike, has a passenger riding pillion. The rider is all black leather and metal—metal shoulder pads, a breastplate—and his head, bare except for a pair of goggles, is shaven except for a bright red swatch on top. A Mohawk, this one who veers his bike in an attempt to cut Max off from the inside, but Max is ahead of him, blocking him, forcing him to swing back and lose ground. Almost naked, the pillion passenger is tightly hugging the rider, leaning with the movement of the bike, his long golden hair being whipped back by the airstream.

There is the bike, then the chrome and brown street racer, and then the dune buggy covered with animal skins. The noise of the engines hammers through the rippling heat. Max swings the black-on-black—the old pursuit car from his police days—from side to side, forestalling the efforts of his pursuers to creep up inside of him. The heat, and the noise, and beside him, the dog whimpers a little. The tiredness has gone now; the adrenalin shoots through him like quicksilver, the shrieking in his ears, his head full of the sound that seems to be punched into it through dozens of holes, and a curtain of red dust at times partially obscuring the three vehicles close behind him.

A bend, and taking it close on the inner side, the dune buggy coming around it in a wide sweep, and the street racer, cutting in between it and Max. The bike has fallen behind.

The road rises. His foot hard down, Max takes the rise, and for an instant, the briefest fraction of time, it seems as if his wheels have left the ground, and he is airborne. Then there is a thud, a bump, and the car is slewing to one side of the road. A wrench on the wheel to correct the drift, and at the bottom of the rise, blocking the road, a tangle of wrecked vehicles, one of them a trailer down on one crumpled wheel, cars that had been torn apart, wreckage everywhere, scattered and strewn across the road.

No time to decide, or even to slacken speed, just take it as it comes, trust to luck—always trust to luck, and luck had always brought him through in the past, maybe it would again . . . No time to think even, with the heart feeling large and tight in the chest, the marauders only a matter of a few yards behind him. To slow down now . . . no chance. The supercharger drums and throbs, there is the reek of petrol. His reflexes as finely tuned as the great engine over which he has taken such loving care, tinkering, adjusting, polishing, treating it like a baby, and now . . . now . . .

The landscape lifts and turns half a degree or more, seems to be vibrating, breaking up . . . the trailer looms, fills the windscreen, and then, once again, a matter of only feet away, a wrench on the wheel, and he is locked into a sweeping curve to the right, past the trailer, and through the wrecks that are scattered around it, cannoning off them, ploughing through them with a tortured scream of rending metal.

Still going, pushing the wrecks out of the way, dislodging them and pushing them deeper into the dust, which shears up from beneath the spinning wheels, and behind him, as he comes around in the curve, slamming broadside into another rusted hulk, bouncing off it, forcing a way through, the no-name dog barking furiously, jumping up and down in agitation in the kiddies' seat—behind him, then to one side as he pulls the car out of the curve, he sees the bike with the Mohawk and golden passenger flying through the air with a sort of effortless grace, swooping through the air like some great bird clear over the trailer, and in that quivering instant before it hits the ground, lurches a little, then righting itself, begins to weave its way through the wrecks, it seems as if it is stuck there, suspended against the sky from which the heat has drained all color.

The road racer doesn't quite make it over the trailer. It knocks against the trailer, then spinning, clips one of the wrecks, swerves, bumps another wreck, the engine racing furiously, dust swirling. Max has straightened out of the curve, and is heading across the open country, aware now that the third vehicle, the dune buggy, has managed to avoid the wreckage, and has veered off to the right in an attempt to head him off.

Then Max is swinging back to the highway again, ducking in between it and the buggy, which cuts sharply in after him. The bike and the racer have already left the wreckage behind them, and are heading up the highway towards the point where Max rejoins it, with the buggy bouncing across the rough terrain behind him.

"You're a good kid, Max. One day you'll make a good cop."

One day. Maybe it was something then to be a good cop. Maybe it meant something to be a good cop. One thought about cops in those days, bad people and cops, the division not always so clear cut, but they existed, and people talked about law and order, the need to keep order, but that was at a time when there *were* laws to be kept, although they were fast disappearing even then, those laws to

which people—those *good* people, law-abiding people—still paid some sort of lip service, because old habits died hard. A good cop. One day, Max you'll make a good cop.

The light had been reflected from the Chief's high shaven skull. It had gleamed on black leather. Superimposed on the harsh, dry landscape that is rushing up at him, the same monotonous landscape, and with his pursuers, the marauders, gaining on him again on this long, flat stretch of road, the Chief's face, the thick neck, the broad shoulders and powerful forearms, that ugly, lined face, and the nose that had been battered so many times in the years he had been in the force that it was now a squat, shapeless blob spread across his face, which made his flinty eyes appear far too close together, and the mouth too small to balance it. The Chief, worn out, disillusioned, no longer even making a token attempt to keep up the morale in his disintegrating force.

"I don't know any more, Max. I don't know any more about one goddam thing."

Thoughts and speed, and everything falling apart, tyres gripping the road surface, and then, suddenly, the loud whooping sound that rises up from somewhere beneath the dashboard of this racing charger, and which seems to drop around him in waves, like hoops that are being thrown over him—hoops that become tighter and tighter as they drop over him. Christ, it's the fuel, running low—the alarm letting him know the fuel is running low—and, shit, there's nothing for it but to cut out the supercharger, and once that has been cut out . . . No choice. Take it as it comes. Good cop, Max.

Slowing down now. The alarm has faded away, but the echoes remain, flying around inside the head. As the speed falls away, it seems now that Max is crawling along. With speed there is life, but without speed, just going along, 100 or more, it is as if an essential part of Max has fallen away, choked away by the whoops from the alarm. So . . . So the dog has crawled under the seat. The dog knows there will be trouble. Max's relaxed posture is deceptive; every nerve end is keyed up. It has happened before, many times before, more times than he can remember, even if he wants to remember—and it will happen again. Expectant, waiting, the marauders fast closing the distance, the bike coming up on the passenger's side, looming up in the corner of Max's vision—another nomad biker with his golden lover clinging tightly to him as they draw abreast. Brief impressions, disjointed and flickering, the biker raising something and aiming it at him, a bow it looks like, a crossbow, but

there's hardly time for Max to notice this, to really register what it is the fiery Mohawk is aiming at him, as the road racer is drawing up on his side, the passenger in the road racer also raising a weapon, and glancing at it, Max can see that it is a gas-powered porta-pak gun from the large rounded barrel of which protrude six metal arrows. The finger tightens on the trigger. Bracing himself, Max hits the brakes.

The locked tyres screech their protest as the car skids until it is almost at right-angles to the road. Caught unawares, both the bike and the road racer surge past him, just as the porta-pak looses its deadly arrows. The car is still shuddering as Max lines it up with the road again, as two of the arrows smack uselessly against its side, and as one of them thuds into the fleshy upper part of the biker's arm. The bike swerves, and leaves the road, weaving erratically across the dry, rutted ground, and that's one of them out of the picture for the moment, and maybe not for very long at that, once the rider has picked up his balance again and brought his bike back onto the road. The dune buggy is still coming in across country to try and head Max off and the road racer just in front of him, so now that he has a slight advantage, it's time for Max to take the initiative. He can do something now, with that racer just in front of him; he needn't feel so useless, so much the victim.

Changing down, hitting the supercharger again, and that low rumble rising to a high scream, that great surge of power that lifts him and carries him forward, fast closing the distance between him and the racer, ramming into the rear of the racer, a bump, a jolt, the metallic clash of metal on metal, wheels screaming, again, and again, drawing back slightly, then hurling the raging machine against the racer—and now there is another intersection ahead of them, and a long road rig abandoned at the side of the road. The dune buggy is cutting right in now; it has almost reached the intersection, where besides the road rig, there is a mass of debris scattered about, junk, bits of furniture, broken things. Max eases back again, nerves tingling now, a delicious feeling, in action, judgment cool, calculating his chances, then foot down again, the pedal pressed right down to the floorboards, flush with the floorboards, the engine howling as the car springs forward again, ramming the road racer, hurling it away just as the speeding dune buggy bumps back onto the road.

Beautiful. What could be more beautiful, or satisfying to see the road racer smash into the rear of the dune buggy, catching it, lifting it and flinging it away like a broken toy? What music there is in the

echo of that scream that has come from the racer just as it hit the buggy, and sent it spinning like a top into the side of the road rig. There is poetry, surely, of a rough and savage kind—and it seems that the action has slowed down enough to give emphasis to those curves and parabolas that are so intricately described—in the sight of the road racer sliding around in a half-circle and ramming hard into a power pole, which splinters and snaps with the force of the impact, and slowly, slowly topples onto the road. There is no sign of movement from the road racer, and the dune buggy is nothing more than a pile of twisted, crumpled metal beneath the implacable bulk of the road rig. A wheel spins, dust settles along with the silence.

Throwing on the handbrake, Max—the valiant, the victor—swings the black on black around in a tight turn, and pulls up in the middle of the intersection.

Winners and losers, victors and vanquished. Fuel is streaming from the ruptured tank of the dune buggy. Swinging himself out of the car, Max reaches into the back and pulls out a jerry can. A soft moaning sound is coming from the crumpled buggy. The spilt fuel is forming a widening rainbow pool on the bitumen. Bending over the broken fuel tank, Max wedges the jerry can beneath the gushing fuel, he whips the bandana he is wearing from around his neck, and begins to mop up the gasolene from the bitumen with it.

“For without fuel, they were nothing. They had built for themselves a house of straw . . .”

The gushing fuel rattles the can. Max squeezes the soaking bandana out into the can. The moaning from inside the dune buggy is barely audible now. That, and the gasolene drumming into the can are the only sounds.

But, suddenly, there is another sound, a shrill whistle that slices keenly through the silence and desolation. Max looks up, and sees, on the crest of a low hill overlooking the intersection, the scarlet Mohawk straddling his bike and grinning down at him, a figure in black leather and metal that glints in the harsh light. Still with his arms around him, the golden boy’s face is expressionless; it might have been chiselled from stone, yet how sensual are its lines. They stare at each for a long, vibrant moment, these two, wandering Max and the grinning Mohawk, and then, slowly, deliberately, his eyes never leaving Max, the figure on the hill raises one hand, and closing it around the haft of the arrow that is embedded in his arm, gives it a sharp tug, and the arrow comes free. A trickle of blood

runs down his arm from the wound. Triumphantly, the biker nomad holds up the arrow, brandishing it at Max as he screams his defiance and hatred of the man who has, for the time being, outwitted him.

Then, slipping the arrow into the quiver at his hip, the biker guns the motor, and swinging the bike away, disappears from the crest of the hill. The sound of the engine fades into the distance, and Max is alone.

## CHAPTER TWO

The Humungus rules the vermin. The vermin rule the world. The words daubed there, on the side of the rig in human blood. The tyres of the rig have been punctured and slashed by the arrows that are still sticking out of them. The windows have been smashed. As he expected, there is a hollow echo from the fuel tank when he taps it with his knuckles. What had he expected after all? The action had been purely instinctive. The Humungus rules the vermin. Who, or what, is the Humungus? Just as Max is reaching up to open the door of the cabin, there is a scream from behind him, an unearthly sound, mindless, a terrified croak. Max stiffens then slowly turns towards the source of the sound. From the mangled remains of the dune buggy, a hand has emerged, the splayed fingers rigid, the fingernails deeply scoring the paintwork. Then, as Max watches those desperately scrabbling fingers, they suddenly go rigid, as if a titanic struggle is being waged within the squashed confines of the tangled metal, a short-lived battle that has only the one, inevitable ending. Then the rigidity has gone from the fingers, and the hand falls lifelessly, and as if this is a signal for the dam gates to burst open, a torrent of dark, glistening blood spills over the wreckage onto the bitumen. With a sigh, Max reaches up again, and this time opens the cabin door.

He sees it coming, but he is not quick enough to get out of the way. His first thought, as the thing, the object, comes toppling out of the cabin, then striking him on the shoulder, sends him staggering, is that it is a sack. The object hits the ground with a loose wet sound, and Max is staring down at the body of a man, bloated, putrefying in the heat, the upturned face swollen hideously and tinged with blue. Sticking out of the neck of the corpse are two arrows from a crossbow, and from around them the flesh is rotting away. Then the stink hits Max, sweet, sickly, and with an effort of will he forces

himself not to gag. He notices something on the ground near the truck driver's open hand, and holding his breath because already the smell of putrefaction is creeping through his clothes into his skin, he bends over and picks up the object.

Holding it in the palm of his hand, he recognises it as a tiny music box with a handle, a hurdy-gurdy—and how long is it since he has seen one of these? Since he was a kid. Taking the handle between his thumb and forefinger, he winds it, then stops winding it when it begins to tinkle out the tune "Happy Birthday". He drops it into his pocket, then picking up the jerry can, moves back to the intersection where the dog is waiting for him in the black-on-black pursuit car.

Driving again, no bandits, just himself out in the open country, nothing to see, not even animals because they had been picked off long ago, back in the days of the Armalite gangs.

The Armalite gangs. Max smiles grimly. By today's standards, they seem tame as they battled their way out of the choking cities through the chaos of the inter-urban freeways to the freedom of the Transcontinental One. With their stereo systems blaring, engines screaming, they would throw their pickups hundreds of miles through the night to a chosen rendezvous, where there was only the black tarmac and the weird, grotesque shapes that thrust up from the blighted landscape around them, and it was here that they systematically set about creating their own terror.

First, it had been cattle, then when there was no more cattle, it had been the massive road trains that had barrelled at great speeds down the Transcon One, when a carefully arranged crossfire from both sides of the highway could knock out enough of the steel-reinforced tyres to send the rig off the road into the scrub where it was quickly plundered of its cargo.

This combination of profit and excitement attracted more gangs, and fairly soon, because they otherwise had little chance of getting through, the drivers of the road trains took to travelling with a small arsenal on hand, and with massive spotlights capable of turning the road and a large area to either side of into broad daylight.

A long, long time ago. The beginning of the disintegration. After the Transcon One had been declared off-limits to all its rigs by the all-powerful National Retail Corporation, the cost of consumer goods

soared alarmingly, and in the ensuing public outcry, the Central Bureaucracy, meeting in emergency session, had authorised the establishment of an elite group of highway patrol cops whose sole function it was to destroy the Armalite gangs, no matter how. This was the Breaker Squad.

There is a hot wind blowing up. The engine rumbles smoothly. The abandoned rig with the bloated corpse of its driver on the road, and the dune buggy, are a long way behind him now. He is eating up the miles. Max is still back in the days of the Armalite gangs and the Breaker Squad that was set up to squash them. It helps pass the time to think about things like that. The Breaker Squad and the Armalite gangs, and not Jessie and Sprog lying dead on the road.

Special requirements were needed to get into the Squad, mainly a love of fast cars and hard driving, combined with the cunning and disregard for life necessary to beat the gangs at their own game. Max remembers the camp where they had been sent for a rigorous two-week course, and where, by the time it was over, eleven of the hundred recruits were dead, their cars shattered and their bodies smashed beyond all recognition. Then had come ten days of training in unarmed combat with the Special Commando Task Force, following which the week on the firing range seemed like child's play.

They were days of challenge and excitement, and comradeship, when Max was part of a team, and there was the feeling that at last something worthwhile was being done—and one didn't have to play it by book any more—to halt the rampages of the gangs. In their modified police compacts with crude but effective armour plating, long range tanks and V-8s which could put them over 240 kpm with no effort at all, they were at last ready to take on the Armalite gangs.

Maybe they had held the tide back a bit, but that tide just grew and grew, became irresistible. As soon as they had cut out and eliminated one gang, another one appeared to take its place. Max shook his head. In the child's seat beside him the nondescript mongrel dog is sitting up, staring out at the flat dry country that is flashing past them.

Then, as he comes down over a rise in the road, a movement across to the right catches Max's eye. He looks across, and sees that a kite is hovering in the air above a dune—a kite on which a grinning face is painted. The line that is keeping it in place, swinging and

fluttering as the wind catches it, comes down behind the dune, and Max, curious to know what is behind the dune, curious to know why a kite with a man's grinning face on it should be hovering above a sand dune in the middle of the wilderness, pulls the car up at the side of the road. Maybe it is a trap, he couldn't be sure it isn't a trap, but he can't ignore it, he should check it out, just in case . . .

Taking another empty jerry can from the stock of them he is carrying in the back of the car, he picks up the tyre iron from behind the front seat, then leaving the car in the dog's charge, cautiously makes his way across the sand to the dune above which the kite is hovering at the end of the line that secures it in place. The wind catches flurries of sand and sends them whirling across the face of the dune. Max's boot sinks into the hot sand as he drudges up the side of the dune, holding the tyre iron out in front of him, ready for anything, expecting the unexpected, tightly gripping the metal, all senses strained, careful not to make a sound that might alert anyone who might be on the other side of the dune. The sand crunches softly beneath his feet as he climbs.

As he nears the top of the dune, the country on the far side of it gradually inches into view, more dunes, more sand, stretching away to the horizon which is lost behind a curtain of shimmering heat. There is no sound from the other side of the dune. The kite swings back and foward in the wind.

Then Max is at the top, looking down, at a primitive gyrocopter, barely more than a motor, a seat and a rotor mounted on a chassis, to which the kite is tethered. From the gyrocopter, a single set of footprints leads away to another dune, over the dune and disappears. Max stands still for a long moment, alert, his eyes ranging and quartering the area around the gyrocopter below him, the wind hot and dry against his face, sniffing the air as he tries to pick up the scent of danger. He just isn't sure. It could still be a trap. Nothing moves. The silence is immense. Max begins to move down the slope towards the makeshift gyrocopter.

There is still no movement, no sign of life. The wind whips the sand from the tops of the surrounding dunes. Max stares thoughtfully at the set of footprints that lead away across the dune, then moving close to the gyrocopter, walks carefully around it, looking closely for any sign that it might be booby-trapped. But there are no wires, nor any indication that the sand has been smoothed over. All the same, he walks very lightly up to the machine, and reaching up, taps the fuel tank. It is empty.

He is lowering his arm when he hears a low hissing sound coming from very close by. He freezes, then turning his head very slowly, careful not to make a sudden movement, sees the snake, black and deadly, coiled around the vertical shaft of the gyro, only inches away from him, poised to strike. The forked tongue darts and flicks, the snake hisses again. Max tenses. The snake gleams cruelly in the strong sunlight, its squat head weaves a little, and there is nothing but evil in the fixed stare of those obsidian eyes.

Suddenly, the snake lunges, its mouth gaping to reveal the sharp, deadly fangs. Light ripples along the creature's long, shiny back as it strikes out with incredible speed. The snake is quick, and in less than a second those fangs would be injecting their venom into Max's bloodstream, but Max, who had been anticipating the lunge, had even calculated the speed at which it would be made, is even quicker. As the snake is diving towards him, he springs forward, and as part of that extraordinarily well-coordinated movement, grabs the snake by the back of the head, and lifts it into the air. The snake writhes and threshes its body in a violent attempt to escape the vise-like grip, but Max is holding it too tightly. All he has to do now is kill it by bashing in its head with the tyre iron.

"Don't hurt that snake!"

The voice comes from behind him. Max swings towards it to see a long gangling individual rising up out of the sand, materialising out of the sand it seems. The guy is spitting out sand, there is a length of rubber hose clenched between his teeth, as he rises from the shallow depression he has made in the sand which, with the sand also covering him, and the piece of hose for breathing, has been a perfect hiding place. Now he is out of his hiding place, and the loaded crossbow in his hands is aimed straight at Max's throat.

"Put him back. Gently now . . ."

Without taking his eyes from the other man, Max lays the snake down on the rotor, then releases it. The snake doesn't move.

"Sounded like a big V-8 to me." There is a lopsided grin on the gyro captain's face. He is wearing an ancient flying helmet, with a pair of goggles pushed up over them. "I guess I got myself some guzzolene."

The crossbow is steady. His finger is tense on the trigger. Max stares at him. He is still holding the tyre iron. "Hey, before you do that,"

he says, “there’s one thing maybe you should know.”

“Yeah? Yeah? You tell me what it is I should know.”

“Just a warning, friend. The car’s booby trapped, and if you touch any of those tanks—*boom!* You’ll be scattered all over the countryside, sweetheart. There won’t be enough left of you to make a sandwich.”

The captain glances in the direction of the pursuit car on the other side of the dune, then stares at Max again, wary, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. He makes a sharp gesture with the crossbow.

“Drop that iron. And the gun. Undo the belt and give it to me.”

Max does what he is told. He drops the tyre iron onto the sand, then unbuckling his belt, takes it off and holds it out to the stranger, who moves cautiously towards him, holding the crossbow steady with one hand, while with the other grabs hold of the belt and drapes it over his shoulder. He gestures with the crossbow again.

“Okay, let’s move. Just back up. Keep facing me.”

They move, back up over the dune. The smile doesn’t leave the gyro captain’s face. “You’re quick—I must say that for you. Never seen anyone so quick. Never seen anyone quicker than that snake. Reflexes—that’s what you’ve got. Me? I’ve got brains.” He taps his forehead with one finger. “Up here, you know.”

Their feet plunge into the sand. The sun is hot on Max’s face. He can feel the sweat beading at his hairline, then trickling down his face. Up over the crest of the dune, and down the other side to the car.

“Okay, you show me the booby trap.”

Lowering himself onto his haunches, Max reaches under the car for the machete he has clipped to the chassis. Another precaution. Never can be too sure. His hand touches the handle of the machete. If he can get it out . . . Then something is pricking the back of his neck—something cold and sharp. His skin tingles with the contact. The voice just behind him is low and threatening.

“A fella—a quick fella—might keep a weapon under there.” The tip of the arrow jabs against the nape of Max’s neck. “Then I’d have to pin his head to the panel, wouldn’t I?”

So it isn't the machete. Max slides his hand away from the handle of the machete, and just before bringing it out from under the car, moves it across to a detonator box where he flicks a switch. He straightens, and the pressure of the arrow against the back of his neck falls away, although the sensation remains. The gyro captain stays close, the crossbow levelled, his finger on the trigger. Max straightens, and moves to the driver's door of the car. He is about to open it, but the gyro captain gestures again with the crossbow, waving him away from the door.

"There's one more," Max tells him.

"Oh no." The captain shakes his head. "You don't play me the fool."

Motioning him to one side, and keeping the crossbow trained steadily on Max's head, the captain reaches up with his free hand, and opens the car door. There is a brief pause, a hiatus, expectant, something about to happen, which only Max knows for sure will be a fact. And it does happen. The gyro captain, the flyer with the old-fashioned helmet and goggles, has no way of knowing about the dog inside the car, no way of expecting that at the moment he opens the car door, this stranger with the crossbow, that the dog would leap out at him, snarling, fangs bared, leaping straight for his throat, hurling him back, knocking him off-balance, so that with a loud twang, the crossbow looses the arrow which only just misses Max who is already diving for him, and buries itself in the door of the car.

With all the force of his weight, Max knocks the gyro captain to the ground, pinning him to the ground, at the same time reaching down and sliding out the knife he has concealed in his boot, bringing up the knife, and forcing the captain's head back, prepares to drag the razor-sharp edge of the knife across his throat.

The captain's eyes are rolling in terror. There is a bubble of foam at the corner of his mouth, and his bony face is streaming with sweat. He gasps and pants, and the words rush out, disjointed, desperate, pleading.

"Gas! Petrol! You got to . . . listen to me. Guzzolene. Plenty of it. Hundreds . . . thousands of gallons. As much as you ever want."

Max holds the knife only a fraction of an inch from the pilot's throat. Maybe it is the truth—maybe it isn't. "Where?"

The captain's chest is heaving with the effort to speak, to save his

own life. “Not far. Ten . . . maybe twenty miles from here. Pumping it they are. Refining it. Ka-chunk . . . ka-chunk . . . ka-chunk. Day and night. Never stops. A whole tanker full.”

The knife still hovers. It would slice through that throat like butter. Just a thin barely visible line at first, a pencil line that would slowly become redder and redder, tiny beads of blood appearing at the beginning, then the gush . . . It is possible. He could be telling the truth. Max looks at him doubtfully.

“Assholes,” he mutters.

The captain’s eyes are shining. His mouth quivers loosely. He desperately wants to be believed. He wants to live. “It’s there. I’m not kidding you. Betcha it’s there. But I’ll tell you straight. It’s not self-serve. No way. It’s under guard. Too hard for me. But a man of your ingenuity. Jesus, I reckon . . .”

Max presses the blade against his throat again. A thin pencil line, tiny drops of blood . . . “Where?”

The captain gulps. His prominent adam’s apple does a series of quick bobs. His tongue darts over his dry cracked lips. “Kill me, and you’ll never find out.”

Which makes some sort of sense. Nothing to lose by having a look, and if this guy is buying time by leading him out on a wild goose chase, then he’ll soon find out that he has made one big mistake.

Grabbing the pilot by the front of his shirt, Max hauls him to his feet, and pushes him towards the car. Ten minutes later they are out on the road again, and Max has made sure his prisoner won’t try to pull anything on him, because he knows that if he makes a single move, a sudden jerk—or worse still, if the dog in the back who has firmly in his mouth the wire that connects to the trigger of the shotgun, the muzzle of which is strapped to the back of his head, the stock resting across the back of the seat—he knows that anything at all, a sudden distraction, maybe even a rabbit bounding across the landscape, the dog will pull the wire, and the wire will pull the trigger, and the gyro captain will have at least half of his head blown away. He sits very still. He hardly dares to breathe, and it is obvious that this is the longest journey he has, in his thirty years or so, ever had to make. The slightest distraction, a bump in the road . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

Looking down at the plain below from the top of the cliff, the scene is truly amazing. There is noise, and constant movement, and it is hard to take it all in at first. It takes Max a few moments to absorb it all and work out what it means, all that noise, the revving motors, the police sirens, the blasting car horns, the screaming, the war whoops—all these sounds they had heard from a long way off, as they had pulled up on the far side of the rocky outcrop of rock that thrust abruptly out of the sand.

Now, at the top of this rock, they can see the fortified camp surrounded by a deep ditch and barbed wire that stands in the middle of the plain. They can see the ploughed fields alongside the camp, the works huts, and the corral that holds a couple of cows, a horse, and some bales of hay. They can see the cracking tower inside the camp, and the gardens, and the accommodation huts.

The camp is under attack. Bikes, dune buggies and street racers speed across the plain towards the camp, and the air seems to be thick with the crossbow arrows that rain down on the walls, where the defenders are returning the fire with flaming arrows and twirling fireballs.

The vehicles swoop in towards the compound, loose their missiles, then swerve away again. They come in waves, these marauders, the Mohawk Bikers, the Smegma Crazies in their dune buggies and the Gayboy Berserkers in their street racers, clouds of dust rising into the air behind them and drifting across the plain.

“Well, I never said it would be easy.” The gyro captain’s hands are manacled. The dog keeps a watchful eye on him.

With a grunt, Max unhooks the broken binoculars from the equipment belt around his waist, and raises them to his eyes. The captain is still talking behind him, but Max doesn't listen; he is too intent on what is going on below them.

The binoculars sweep the area methodically, through the dust, focusing first on the donkey pump inside the camp, then moving up to the flame, along the pipes, then up again to the cracking tower. He is very thoughtful as he studies the cracking tower. So it seems that the gyro captain wasn't lying after all. It looks like there's plenty of oil down there, a bonanza, a supply that could last for years. The only thing is that it's no secret that the oil is there. The marauders are attacking. The vermin rule the world. The binoculars pause briefly on one of the defenders on the wall of the camp as he fires arrows down at the vehicles beneath the wall. Next to him, a body hangs over the edge of the wall, suspended there by one caught foot.

Suddenly, there is a voice, booming, amplified, giving orders. Max swings the binoculars across to the right, towards where the voice is coming from. He sweeps forward, then back, panning right across the confused and crowded drama that is being enacted in the dust. The binoculars stop their sweep. Max focuses. Ah . . .

The Humungus rules the vermin. The vermin rule the world. The vermin are throwing themselves against the high, fortified walls of the camp, like terriers they are darting in, firing off their weapons and swinging away to regroup, to re-form in readiness for another stinging attack. And the voice speaking into the hand-held microphone directs them. The Humungus.

Max stares at the huge man in the double-engined frame on six wheels, the great hulk of the man, the powerful muscles rippling on his bare arms, and his face covered with a metal mask. The Humungus, the marauder, deploying his troops, launching attack after attack, yelling into the microphone in his hand, watching as the vehicles, the buggies and bikes, the street racer dart in towards the walls of the fortress beneath a layer of red dust.

The Humungus . . . The fiend in the metal mask, Viking and Vandal, Attila the Hun, the Brute personified, who leads his army of Mohawk Bikers, Smegma Crazies and Gayboy Berserkers, the riffraff that have attached themselves to his growing band of raiders. The towering Humungus—who knows anything about him? Where does the truth end, and the legend begin, and perhaps there is legend in

the truth, truth in the legend?

The battle rages, part of the perpetual warfare that has virtually reached stalemate, but there's no letting up because the stakes are too high. And Max keeps the glasses trained on the powerfully built man in his double-engined, six-wheeled command vehicle, handling his troops with the cool efficiency of a man who has had, obviously, considerable experience of command.

Behind Max, the gyro captain is becoming even more agitated. He doesn't want to be here. He wants to be away. The Humungus fills the twin lenses of Max's glasses, and as he turns his head which is completely bald with the exception of a few wispy strands that straggle out from beneath the straps of the mask, Max can see a large vein throbbing at the base of his skull.

"Okay, there it is." There is a wheedling note in the captain's voice. "That's the camp. That's where they got all that fuel. If anyone can get in there, I know it's gonna be you. So . . ." Max lowers his glasses as the other man shuffles forward on his knees, his manacled hands outstretched towards Max. "Look, I've got to go feed the snake. You let me loose now. I've kept my word, haven't I? I brought you here like I said I would." He shakes his head. "I wasn't going to do you any harm. Me—I'm meek and mild, wouldn't hurt anyone, you should know that. All my life, I've been wanting, I've been dreaming . . . There are still things I've got to do —even now. So how about it? I've always kept my word, so what about letting me go now? Gotta get back to the machine."

Max pushes himself up onto his feet, and reaching down, his face remaining expressionless because he doesn't feel anything any more, grabs the man kneeling at his feet by the collar and drags him back across the ground to a tree. The captain is showing signs of panic now. Maybe he knows there's no way of reasoning with this man who seems to be driven by inner forces that bear no human relation.

"Look, we had a deal! Je-*sus,* what more do you want? I showed you where the gas is—over there. Now you let me go. We had a deal."

But Max is already chaining him to the tree, securing him fast. He works very quickly, efficiently.

"The arrangement was—I wouldn't kill you. That's what the deal

was."

*"Shit!* You double crossing . . . What right have *you* got . . ." The captain is red in the face. He is angry. His pale eyes bulge, a vein throbs at his temple, and his mouth twitches. The twitch becomes even more pronounced when Max pushes the shotgun close to his face. The man means business. His voice is low and menacing.

"I'd reckon I had got myself a bargain—wouldn't you?"

The captain's adam's apple lifts, then drops again. He gulps a couple of times, and even when Max lowers the gun and turns away from him, moving back to the crest of the ridge and the sounds of all-out warfare that are rising from the valley below, he doesn't speak. He had seen the flat, empty expression in the other man's eyes, cold, deadly, devoid of any feeling at all, and had known beyond any shadow of doubt that he wasn't bluffing.

There is not enough length in the chain to enable him to scramble more than a few feet away from the tree to which he is chained—certainly not enough to bring him up to the rim of the rock from where he can look down at the compound below. He can only guess at what is happening down there. Between him and the broad back of Max, who is putting some sticks together to fashion a rough sort of tripod on which he can rest his binoculars, the dog is lying with its muzzle between its paws, watching the captain, ready to leap for his throat again if he makes a sudden move. So the captain has to settle back against the tree and wait to see what happens.

Below, the battle is still raging. It is like a wild sort of ballet down there, movement everywhere on that huge stony stage, a cast of literally hundreds. The Mongol hordes are dashing themselves against the walls of the fortress. The Humungus commands. Max watches it all through the binoculars he has resting across the top of his rough tripod.

This is what it had come to—this, down there. It hadn't taken long. The whole country was a war zone. How long was it now since the last remaining oil tankers had to run the gauntlet of the marauding gangs at a time when road hijacking was the country's only growth industry? How long? The road rigs, semis, trucks and vans had been abandoned where they had stopped, and left to rot. It was the same here as it was in every part of the world. The scene down there was possibly being enacted hundreds of times over at this very minute. The Humunguses control their legions. Max feels the hunger stirring

in his insides. It is an age since he has last eaten. He has to eke out his rations, make them last, because he doesn't know when he will have a chance to stock up on more.

Leaning back from the binoculars which are balanced in the fork of the tripod, he reaches back and drags his pack closer to him over the uneven ground. With a glance at his prisoner chained to the tree, he opens the pack, then pulls out a can that has already been opened. He places it down on the ground beside him, then reaches into the pack once more. The captain is staring at him as he produces an object wrapped in red velvet cloth, holding it carefully —with reverence almost—as if it is something of immense value. The dog, too, sensing something momentous about to happen, is watching Max, its cunning yellow eyes fixed on him, head lifted from between its paws, ears pricked. Max slowly unwraps the red velvet from around the object, which proves to be an elegant silver fork of such craftsmanship, such elegance, a lovingly worked product from another age, that it looks ridiculously out of place in this setting. With his other hand, Max lifts the can, and the silver fork plunges into the lumpy brown dog food.

They watch him eat, the dog and the gyro captain, and Max seems oblivious to either of them. He forks the food into his mouth, and slowly, thoughtfully, chews it before swallowing it and bringing up another forkful from the can. From below, the fevered sound of revving bike engines rises through the heat. Specks of dog food cling between the prongs of the fork as Max lowers it into the can again, and this time leaves it there as he swings back to the binoculars.

The scene leaps back into focus. He can see now, swinging the glasses back to the fortified camp, that the marauders have managed to form a bridge by dragging a number of car wrecks across the ditch at one side of the camp which has been less well-defended because most of the attacks have come from the front, keeping the people in the camp fully occupied while the makeshift bridge was hauled into place. Now it is ready. An attempt to breach the fortress is already underway.

Three bikes are roaring across the stony earth towards the fortress, and for an instant they are the only sign of movement on the plain, the noise from their engines rising until they are almost at fever-pitch as they gain speed, a hammering, rivetting sound that gradually loses its sharpness as the three riders near the fortress walls, from where, after the briefest of lulls, the firing starts up

again.

Then just as the bikes have almost reached the bridge of wrecks, the two outside riders peel away, one to the right and one to the left, swerving and racing on just beneath the walls to draw the fire of the defenders on the ramparts above. But the third rider doesn't turn. He keeps going straight on towards the ramp that has been fashioned from the roofs of the derelict vehicles, rising from his saddle as his machine lifts to take the ramp—and for an instant that seems to extend itself so that there is a quick impression of suspended animation, both bike and rider are airborne, up over the ramp to the wall, but not quite high enough to sail over the wire that has been strung out along the top of the wall. The soaring bike hits the wire, and somersaults, flinging the rider away from it, high over the wall into the compound. He falls hard onto the ground, and lies motionless as a number of the defenders quickly converge on him.

Max resumes his eating, digging the elegant fork into the lumpy dog food and bringing the chunks up to his mouth, while the dog and the captain watch him hopefully. When Max has had enough, he throws the can to the dog, who immediately pounces on it, burying its muzzle inside the can, ferreting out the food that has been left inside. With a groan, the captain begins to edge away from the tree towards the dog and the can into which it is burrowing. The dog's eyes roll towards him as it picks up the movement. Its snout lifts out of the can, teeth bared, and a menacing snarl comes from deep in its throat. The gyro captain stops edging towards the dog who crouches possessively over the can with its hackles raised, ears flattened, snarling viciously at him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Max was coming out of the trees again, running, panicking, in a cold sweat. He had run all the way up the hill, through the trees, and his heart was pounding wildly, he could hear it now—ka-*chunk,* ka-*chunk*—thudding in his ears, wracking his entire body. His nerve-ends were strained, screaming, and then he saw them, the bikes roaring down the road. He saw the bikes first, and then, farther down the road no more than about a mile across, the fields, a cloud of dust, then the van, and that was when everything inside him seemed to seize up. His breathing was quick and shallow; there just wasn't enough air for his burning lungs.

The panic was in its purest form. It was exquisite, and then, just as quickly as everything had seized up inside him, it was falling loose again. His bowels felt as if they were turning to liquid, then he was yelling desperately.

"The fuel line, Jessie! The fuel line's not connected!"

He had been working on the fuel line when he had heard the scream, and grabbing the short-barrelled shotgun and cartridge belt from the front of the van, had charged down through the trees towards the source of the sound he knew had come from Jessie. They had trapped her down there, and somehow she had managed to get away from them and doubled back up the hill to the van. She had Sprog with her—and now they were in the van, speeding down the road, and the bikers were gaining on them.

"Jessie!" His hands were cupped around his mouth. His chest was heaving—ka-*chunk,* ka-*chunk.* *"Jessie!"*

But it was no use. She couldn't hear him. She was too far away, and

the bikes were between them. There was no way she could hear him. He began to run. At any moment now, starved of fuel, the van would stop, and with that gang of bikers hard on its tail . . . He began to run. It was probably already too late. He prayed it wasn't. He prayed for a miracle. Ka-*chunk,* ka-*chunk,* ka-*chunk.* Six bikers. Jessie and the kid wouldn't have a chance. He ran like a man no longer in control of himself, but possessed of a demon force.

Then there was a new sound, coming it seemed, from very far away at first, then much louder against his ears. There is something hard against his back, and his muscles are aching. He hears the sound again. It is some sort of bugle. He opens his eyes. In the moonlight, he can make out the gyro captain beside the tree, with the empty dog food can in one hand, and the finger of his other hand in his mouth, sitting still, his head a little to one side, listening. Max turns to the edge of the ridge. Ka-*chunk.* From the camp below, the sound of the oil cracker throbs through the warm night air. Then it is swamped by the sound of the gunning of bike engines.

From his vantagepoint, Max watches the bikes moving up to the high ground above the camp, where, in the pale moonlight, he can see a hut with some hay bales nearby, and silhouettes of either sleeping or dead cattle. The bikes swoop up the slope, and pull up in a circle in front of the hut. Behind them lumbers a tow truck. They mill around for some moments, then there is a faint crackling sound, a flicker of orange appearing behind the cracks of the hut's rough timber walls, flames darting out from between the walls, and fuelled by the dry wood, leaping higher towards the roof. The bikes gleam redly in the reflection of the flames. The dark shadows of the bikers move in front of it as they set fire to the hay bales, then the inert bodies of the cattle, which, Max can see now as the red and orange flames lick against the roof of the hut and consume the bales of hay, are studded with the arrows that have been fired into them.

The stench of burning flesh drifts across the valley to where Max is sitting, very faint, but enough to create a pang in his stomach, and to set the gastric juices flowing. One of the animals has not been set alight. Max watches as some of the gang drag it by its hind legs across to the tow truck and secure it to the back. Then the truck drives away with the animal bouncing and sliding across the ground behind it. The flames leap higher, throwing eerie shadows over the landscape. The sweat that had drenched Max's body when the bugle had broken into the dream that wasn't a dream—a recurring horror from which he cannot escape even in sleep which is never more than scratchy, one part of him straining, aware all the time of what

is happening around him, sensitive to even the most miniscule restructuring of the elements around him—the sweat is drying on his body. There is a gritty sensation behind his eyelids. He can hardly keep his eyes open.

Running down the road, and across the fields in a hopeless attempt to reach the van before the fuel stopped feeding the engine and it spluttered to a standstill. Jessie in the van, and Sprog, the kid, and probably the engine already spluttering as it sucked in the last of the fuel from the broken fuel line. And the bikes were getting closer all the time, gaining on the van, which was now out of sight behind a clump of trees. Running, his heart pounding, ka-*chunk,* ka-*chunk*—his arms and legs pounding up and down like pistons, and the noise of the bikes drumming inside his head.

Then he had reached the trees, and there was the road again, and the bikes now no more than a cluster of specks in the distance, disappearing down the long, straight stretch of road. His first thought was that the van was still going, that it was somewhere ahead of the bikes, and now he would never have a hope of catching it. Then he looked back, and saw it, the van, standing in the middle of the road, its doors open, and in front of the van . . .

If she had cut back across the fields, Jessie and the kid might have had a chance. But she must have panicked, and carrying the child, had run along the road away from the van, and with the bikes—the Toecutter and his gang—bearing down on them, they hadn't had a chance. Max had almost been able to see what happened, the impact of the bike as it struck her, wrenching Sprog out of Jessie's arms and throwing him beneath the wheels of one of the bikes—and then Jessie herself, tossed into the air like a rag doll and spinning back to earth to have her legs and abdomen crushed by another set of screaming tyres.

What might have been. If she had run across the fields instead of straight along the road where they couldn't miss her . . .

The sound of engines, the dog growling, and Max's eyes jerk open, instantly awake. The sky is lightening. It is almost dawn. Scrambling around from his position against the rock, Max peers down at the plain, just in time to see the old bus with the steel-reinforced side swing back to close off the entrance to the camp. Three vehicles fan out from the camp in three directions, and there is a flurry of movement from the rise where the marauders are camped. The chain rattles as the gyro captain struggles forward in a

fruitless effort to see what is happening.

“What’s up?”

“Don’t know.”

“Something must be happening.”

From the rise, the marauders have broken up into three groups, and with the giant Humungus himself leading one of these groups, are setting off in hot pursuit of the three camp vehicles as they speed off into the wasteland. Four of the marauders remain on a pinnacle overlooking the camp.

Suddenly, as the three vehicles and their pursuers draw farther away from the camp, the steel-sided bus slides back again, and a dune buggy bursts out through the opening and heads towards the hill from the top of which Max keeps watch. Reaching the hill, the buggy swerves, then disappears around the side. Lurching to his feet, Max hurries across to the other side of the hilltop.

Beyond the black-on-black pursuit car which Max has left at the foot of the hill beside a dead tree, the buggy has just reached the road, when, suddenly, from behind an outcrop of rock on the other side of the road, three bikes with Mohawk riders, followed by a tow truck with a skinhead driver, swoop out onto the road to cut off the buggy. Max recognises the first of the Mohawk riders by his crimson top-notch, and by the almost naked golden youth riding pillion behind him.

The dune buggy doesn’t have a chance. The bikes are right onto it, the riders firing arrows into its tyres, and swinging in to lash out at the helmeted driver and his passenger with lengths of pipes and axes. The buggy swerves, tries to escape its attackers, but they are closing in on it, their arms flailing, and the dull thud of metal striking metal drifts up to Max at the top of the hill.

The buggy skids and attempts to swing back on its track, but the bikes are darting in again, closing off every path of escape. The buggy’s tyres have been torn to shreds by the arrows. The axes and piping clank heavily down on the dented, fractured metal. Then the buggy is rocking and lurching to the edge of the road where it teeters for a moment, then enveloped in a sheet of dust, slides down the bank, hits a rock, tilts, rolls and comes to a halt upside down at the foot of the embankment. The dust settles slowly down over it.

The riders bring their bikes to the top of the bank, and straddling their machines, look down at the crumpled wreckage of the buggy, then with triumphant whoops, scramble down to it. They slide and stumble in their eagerness to get to it, to take it apart to get what they need from it, to drain the tank of its precious fuel.

From their look-out above, Max and the gyro captain look dispassionately down at the scene, as two Mohawkers drag the blood-soaked driver out from beneath the wreckage. Max has seen it all before, there is nothing new, nothing to startle him or drive him into a raging fury.

The wreckage is being torn apart, petrol trickles thinly into a canister. There is someone else down there, crawling out from beneath the wreckage, trying to get away without being seen. A bare leg beneath a ragged tunic, a woman, shapely, long blonde hair . . . and she has no chance to get away, not from the Mohawkers, who sense things before they catch sight of them, and now two of them are leaping out at the woman, catching her, and dragging her up to the roadside.

Beside him, Max hears a long, slow intake of breath from the captain. Glancing at him, he sees the man rummage deep into one of the bulging pockets of his overcoat, then bring out a telescope which Max can see now is attached to his waist by a leather cord. The telescope is more powerful than Max's binoculars, and the captain is just raising it to his eye, when Max reaches out and grasps it from him. The captain mutters a protest, then as Max focuses the telescope, realises there is no point arguing with him, he wouldn't take any notice of him. With a hopeless shake of his head, he picks up the binoculars Max has left on the ground beside him.

There is a crack in the telescope lens. The telescope swings in a long curve, and the scene below leaps into sharp focus, which makes it look as if it is happening no more than a few feet away. It pauses fractionally on the golden youth, who is sitting on one of the bikes, looking impassively on at what is happening around the wreckage. His skin is fair, and his features chiselled, and there is a sort of coquetry about the way he is perched on the motor-bike, one leg drawn up and hugged against his smooth chest. The telescope moves away from him, then stops again.

Now there, in the centre of the lens, sharp as anything, is the wreckage, and the injured driver, blood streaming down his face from a gash in his forehead, has been propped up against one of the

panels. With an evil smile, the Mohawk with the crimson swatch, raises his crossbow and takes aim. There is a deep twang as the arrow is loosed from the bow, then a rising scream of agony as it slices through the man's shoulder, pinning it to the panel. The Mohawker carefully reloads, then raising the bow again, shoots the second arrow into the driver's other shoulder. The driver's body convulses. His screams are hideous.

The cracked telescope moves on to the side of the road, where three of the Mohawkers are holding the struggling girl down on the ground, tearing away her clothes and armour, their movements quick and urgent, driven by the demands of their awakened lust. The girl, naked now, her clothes lying in shreds on the ground around her, screams. Her body writhes and twists as she tries to arch herself up from the ground—but they are too strong for her. One of the Mohawkers, kneeling beside her, brings his fist back from his shoulders, then driving it forward with all his strength, slams it full on her mouth. Her head jerks back. A line of blood seeps out from the corner of her mouth.

Then they are onto her, rampant, straining, slaking themselves in her, earnest, pumping, releasing, then rising to their feet to adjust their clothing and make room for the next. There is no style, no art, and the girl is hardly moving except to roll her head slowly from side to side, and strands of yellow hair are stuck to her gleaming face. Beside Max, the gyro captain is breathing heavily. Once or twice, he swears under his breath.

It takes them only a matter of minutes before they have done with her, and then the last one has pulled himself away from her, is standing over her as she lies spent on the ground. He picks up his crossbow from the ground where he has placed it. There is a roar as the bikes are gunned to life, and then they are heading back towards their camp, leaving only the one man standing over the girl, loading his crossbow, aiming it.

"Jesus!" the gyro captain mutters, and Max is already on his feet, dropping the telescope, and running hell for leather down the side of the slope, the dog at his heels, to where he has left the black-on-black.

"Hey, where are you going?" the gyro captain yells behind him. "What about me?"

The rocks slip from under foot, and he nearly slips. Too late, he

knows he is going to be too late. It wouldn't take more than a second before that crossbow bolt tore out the woman's throat—so why bother? Scrambling down the side of the hill, his arms out from his sides to keep his balance. Stones dislodged and rolling away ahead of him. The guy who had been with her still alive, pinned to the panel of his wrecked buggy by a crossbow shaft through each shoulder. Maybe only just alive. Maybe in the next few seconds, between now and the time Max got there, he wouldn't be alive. There was only one of the Mohawkers there now with them, with the driver of the buggy, and the girl.

Reaching the car, flinging himself into it, the engine roars, screams, the wheels lock in a tight circle as he brings it round onto the road, dust flying, billowing, the girl looking up at the crossbow that is aimed at her throat, knowing she is going to die. With a screech of the brakes, Max pulls up at the point where the dune buggy went off the road, tracks scoring deep into the embankment, the earth all churned up by the tyres of the motor-bikes that had pulled up at the top of the embankment. Max stops the car, and picking up a huge pair of bolt-cutters from beneath the dash, climbs out onto the bank.

The girl is dead, the bolt from the crossbow rising obscenely from her throat, fired with such force that it has pinned her to the ground. There is blood, the girl's eyes are staring, and her head is twisted at a grotesque angle. Against the panel, the buggy driver's head is lolling. He is still alive, but only just by the look of him. His torn clothes are saturated with blood. It has seeped into the ground around his feet.

And there is one other, the last Mohawker, sitting on one of the buggy's upturned wheels, beyond the naked, spreadeagled body of the girl, his back to Max, pulling on his trousers. The crossbow is lying on the ground next to him. Hearing Max coming up behind him, he turns his head, and the sort of lopsided smile on his face, as if he is expecting it to be one of his cronies returning, quickly gives way to an expression of alarm when he sees Max's face, then, his eyes dropping, the pair of bolt cutters he is carrying. He is quick to react. Throwing himself to one side, he dives for the crossbow, but Max has been anticipating this, expecting him to do just this, and as the Mohawker's fist closes around the weapon, Max springs forward, his foot coming heavily down on the guy's wrist, all his weight pressing down on it so that the Mohawker is unable to move it.

The guy grins, in a sort of hopeless way—hopeless, and apologetic, and there is fear as well. Firmly gripping the bolt-cutters, Max raises them high just as the Mohawker opens his mouth to scream, but nothing comes, just a faint croak and some spittle before the cutters come down and smash his skull as easily as if it were an eggshell, crushing it in on bits of bone and gristle. Blood spurts, the Mohawker slumps, quite dead, and Max lifts his boot from his wrist.

The buggy driver, the man from the compound, has seen all this, and his eyes are brimming with tears. He is still bleeding badly, and Max can see now that most of the blood is oozing out from his leg which has been severely crushed. Taking out his handkerchief, Max kneels down in front of him and ties a tourniquet above the wound to staunch the flow of blood. It's a start. There's not much else he can do, except maybe get him out of here and back to the compound where they might have proper medical equipment that would ease the pain. Max straightens.

"Thank . . . thank you." The man's face and body are pale, as if most of the blood has already been drained out of him.

"Let's get it straight," Max gruffly tells him. "I'm looking for guzzolene. That's all I want. Just the guzzolene."

The injured man's voice is very faint, hardly more than a whisper, yet each word seems to cost him a massive effort. His chest heaves. The tourniquet is already blood-soaked.

"As much as you want. Just . . . take me back. I don't . . . don't want to die . . . here."

Picking up the bolt-cutters, Max squeezes them between the man's body and the panel to which he has been pinned. It is a simple matter to cut through the bolts and release the man. Now all he has to do is to get him back to the compound.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The supercharger screams. The fort draws closer, and Max knows they are being watched, not only from the compound but by the marauders, who, so far, have made no attempt to intercept him. He has seen the flashes from the top of one hill, then answered from another hill farther away. In the passenger seat, the wounded man is slipping into unconsciousness and, to bring him back, Max keeps grabbing his shoulder and shaking him. The hut on the slope that had been set on fire by the marauders the night before is still smouldering. On the walls, on the catwalk, and even on the cracking tower, the compound-dwellers stare down at the black vehicle that is speeding towards them across the flat country. In the mirror, Max catches a quick, furtive movement behind and a little to one side, and thinks at first it is a rabbit. But then there is the impression that it is too large to be a rabbit—maybe some other sort of animal, which has now disappeared into a hollow among some rocks.

Just short of the compound wall, in front of the causeway leading to the steel-sided bus that forms the entrance, and within crossbow range, Max stops the car, then stepping out of it, conscious of all those eyes above him watching every move he makes, and careful not to make any sudden suspicious move, moves around the car to the passenger's side. Opening the door, he leans inside the car and slides his arms beneath the inert figure of the wounded man. With a grunt, he lifts the weight, which isn't too heavy, and backing away from the car, hoists him up and drapes him across his shoulders. Then, with his eyes on the line of people on the wall above him, he unfastens his gunbelt and lets it fall to the ground. He raises his arms to show that he has come as a friend, or at least as someone who means to do them no harm. From the wall, the silence is suddenly broken by a woman screaming.

“Nathan! It’s Nathan! He’s got Nathan!”

An order is shouted, and Max walks quickly along the causeway towards the yellow bus, which, as he approaches, is drawn to one side to allow him inside the walls. A group of people are standing in the opening. Trailing blood along the causeway, Max, carrying the injured man across his shoulders, covers the remaining distance to the opening, then stops in front of it. Two people detach themselves from the group, and come towards him, stopping just outside the wall. One of them is a warrior woman, who levels the crossbow she is carrying at Max’s heart, while the man who has accompanied her warily scans the wasteland in case this is a trap. The woman is tall and strapping, her tawny hair pulled to the back of her head, the skins she is wearing only just covering her superb, thrusting breasts. She says nothing. She holds the crossbow steady.

There is a faint rumbling sound, and the group makes way for a rough framework on wheels which is being dragged by a young man. Suspended to the front of this framework from a crane is a second man dangling from a jib in an elastic harness. Max can see he is horribly crippled. The contraption passes Max and heads towards the car.

Then another woman, large, her face twisted in anguish, is pushing her way through the group, and running up to Max, wipes the injured man’s face with a cloth.

“Nathan,” she cries. “Poor Nathan. God have mercy. What a waste!”

Max begins to walk towards the group, while the warrior woman follows with the crossbow aimed at him, and the other woman keeps up with him as she continues to wipe the face of the man he is carrying across his shoulders. Then, with tears streaming down her cheeks, she stops and glares at the group of people, at the man in their midst whose seamed face and the line of his body appear to carry a weary authority.

“It’s all your fault,” she yells at him accusingly. “See what you’ve done now. He didn’t have a chance.” Her shrill voice reverberates throughout the compound.

“Rebecca,” the seamed man says quietly, raising his hand then letting it drop helplessly by his side.

“Yes, you, Pappagallo—I told you, didn’t I?” A small nuggety man with a sour expression on his face takes up the challenge. He makes

a sweeping gesture that embraces the crowd.

He growls and snarls, he is a real curmudgeon. “You all heard me. I warned him, didn’t I? ‘Madness,’ I said.”

The group parts to make way for Max and his burden. There are chickens roaming free in the compound, a couple of dogs and a pig. Another woman holds a knife in one hand and with the other is holding a quivering rabbit down on a chopping block. Near her is a younger girl, about eighteen or twenty, with skin that is lush and golden, vibrant, her straw-yellow hair a tangle, her green eyes boldly studying Max, a provocative pout to her full red lips. Her rounded breasts rise and fall in effortless rhythm, her figure is ripe and voluptuous. She is a creature of lust and abandon.

They are taking the injured man away from Max, lifting him and carrying him towards a battered vehicle that had once, a long time ago, been a bread van. The rear door of the van is open to show two hospital beds inside, one of them already occupied, drip stands and shelves full of medical supplies.

“Pity *your* name wasn’t pulled out of the hat,” the warrior woman is saying to the curmudgeon. “Then it would have been *you* who would have had to go, not Nathan.”

The curmudgeon points to the man with the seamed face, Pappagallo, the man in command. “ ‘We can escape,’ he said, ‘Take our petrol,’ he said.” The pointing finger jabs accusingly. The old man’s eyes are narrowed, white stubble sprouts from his chin and jowls. “ ‘How?’ I said. ‘Get a prime mover,’ he said.” Now the finger is pointing toward the van where the injured man has been taken. “And there’s the result. ‘Madness,’ I said.”

Max is studying the cracking tower, and the tanker of fuel. Pappagallo moves up to him. “Where did you find him?” he asks quietly.

Max shrugs. “Two, three miles away. Left for dead . . . next to his car. We made a deal.”

In the van, they are working on Nathan, cutting the first arrow out of his body, while the big woman whose name is Rebecca, sits beside him, holding his hand, talking softly to him, comforting him.

Pappagallo’s gaze on Max is steady. “The other three vehicles—did you see them?”

Max nods. “Running hard to the southwest. In heaps of trouble.” A brief pause, studying the lined, tired face of the man in front of him, assessing him. “Listen, he said if I brought him in, you would give me the gas. There’s not much time.”

There is a brief disturbance in the crowd as a man pushes his way through and positions himself in front of Max. He has a high forehead and a worried look in his eyes.

“There was a woman in the car,” he says quietly. Everything about him seems to be quiet.

Max looks unwaveringly into those worried eyes. “She’s dead.” A simple statement.

The quiet man’s face works as he struggles to hold back the emotions that have been released by what Max has just told him. His eyes brim with moisture. “How?” he whispers. “What did they do?”

“It was quick.” Max turns back to Pappagallo. “Look, I just want my gas. That was the arrangement. I don’t want to hang around here. I want to be on my way—so, I need the gas.”

The quiet man is slowly moving away with shuffling footsteps, shoulders hunched, head bowed, alone with his own thoughts and memories. In the van, the lusty girl is squatting beside Nathan, holding an air viva device over his face while Big Rebecca pumps air into his lungs. The warrior woman is glaring at Max.

“For all we know he’s one of them. Give him nothing.”

There is a murmur of agreement from the crowd that surrounds Max. The curmudgeon gives a knowing nod. “Yeah, she’s right. He’s a parasite.”

“Trading in human flesh,” someone else cries.

“Trash!” the warrior spits out contemptuously through clenched teeth. “Mercenary trash! Get rid of him.”

Spurred by these remarks, the crowd is beginning to turn ugly. They shift, and mutter among themselves. Fighting down his own rising temper, Max keeps his eyes on Pappagallo. “We had an arrangement.”

Suddenly, there is a scream from the van. Everyone turns towards it. Nathan is lying still on the bunk, and the plastic air viva mask is full of blood. The arrow has been removed from flesh, and the man who removed it is feeling for Nathan's pulse. He looks up and shakes his head. Pappagallo turns back to Max.

"I don't know who you are, but if you had a contract—any sort of deal—it was with him." His chin jerks towards the van and the dead man inside it. "And it died with him."

The women in the van are weeping. Nathan's arms are brought together and folded across his chest. Pappagallo swings away from Max and disappears into the crowd. The warrior woman brings up her crossbow, and holds the tip of the arrow against Max's temple.

"Get moving." She pushes him towards the gate. Gradually, the crowd disperses as everyone returns to their post.

Tagging behind Max now as he is marched towards the gate is a kid, wild-looking, who has appeared from somewhere, and with one part of his mind Max remembers the quick, furtive movement he had picked up in the rearview mirror while he was driving the injured Nathan to the compound. Something too big to be a rabbit. The kid is about eight years old, and is dressed in dog skins. He is carrying what appears to be a chrome boomerang, and on his other hand is a leather glove, like a catcher's mitt, with steel plates.

As they come up to the gates and the people who are standing there move aside to make way for him, Max stops suddenly, and stiffens as he sees that his black-on-black pursuit car is being winched in through the gate. Near it, dangling from the mobile frame, the crippled man in his harness is supervising the operation.

The warrior woman prods Max with the bow. "Be thankful you're still alive."

They move past the car. At Max's heels, the dog, which has been trained to protect the vehicle, gives a low growl. The man strapped to the contraption of wheels holds up the detonator and fuse box and fuse wire. "Gotta hand it to you," he calls down to Max. "Some machine, the last of the pursuit specials, a part of history, and it's a shame to blow it up. Been a mechanic for a long time, and know a work of beauty when I see it, all right."

Reaching out, he gives the car an affectionate pat, and just as his hand touches the car, the dog leaps at him and clamps its jaw

around his twisted, useless leg. The framework shakes and threatens to topple as the snarling dog tugs and worries at the mechanic's leg. With a growl, the feral kid leaps forward to attack the dog, but the lusty girl grabs his arm and hauls him back. The mechanic's assistant swings on the dog with an upraised tyre lever, clearly with the intention of battering the dog to death, and the dog is holding on, tenaciously, its teeth sinking into the nerveless, wasted flesh.

As the tyre lever reaches the apex of its upward swing, Max pushes himself forward and grabs the man's wrist, jerking it, twisting, and with his other hand, wrenching the iron from the attacker's grasp. The others raise their weapons, and Max feels the pricking at the back of his neck, as the sharp tip of an arrow digs into it. Then there is a thread of something warm and sluggish trickling down beneath the collar of his shirt. Everybody is still. For a long drawn-out moment, it seems that time itself has been suspended. The thread of blood has stopped trickling down Max's back; there wasn't much of it. Then the warrior woman is motioning him forward again to the open gate. Slowly, Max bends over and picks up the dog.

"It's okay, dog," he murmurs in soothing tones. "Just do what they say, and . . ."

The words are lost in the rising wail of a siren. From the watchtower someone shouts a warning, and the yellow bus roars across the entrance, closing it off. People are running. Something is happening.

## CHAPTER SIX

What is happening is the grand parade of the Humungus—and what a spectacle it is, set against the barren rocks and beneath the pale sky from which all the color has been drawn by the merciless heat. It is a procession that has its own awesome pomp, a show of strength, all forces out on parade, the engines and sirens of the machines creating a massive metallic symphony, great drumbeats and cymbal clashes of truly heroic proportions.

Here come, in this cavalcade of marauders, the Mohawkers and the female bikers, on their bikes, the Jap monsters, the chopped Harleys, the Trikes; the Smegma Crazies in the dune buggies, and the Gayboy Berserkers in the street racers; and the Skinheads in the two tow trucks.

They all come in formation, these vehicles, and the Humungus machine is at their head, surrounded by a guard comprising one representative from each of the marauder breeds—a tow truck with two Skinheads, a street racer with three Gayboy Berserkers, a dune buggy with two Smegma Crazies, and on his bike the crimson Mohawk with his golden youth pressing against him.

As the convoy comes closer, emerging through the dust and heat haze, the watchers on the walls of the compound can see that there are figures lashed to the front of the advance guard vehicles. There are six figures, covered in blood, their clothes hanging in shreds, two of them in front of the tow truck, one each to the dune buggy and street racer, and like figureheads on the prow of a ship, two men strung up to the front bow of the Humungus machine.

In the camp, Max’s wrists have been manacled by the warrior woman and chained to a post. She is standing at the large crossbow

that is mounted above the causeway, already taking aim at the Humungus machine.

Then, just before she can release the shaft, from one of the bloodied figures lashed to the front of the Humungus machine, a voice rises above the noise of the convoy. It is desperate, pleading.

“Hold your fire!” it screams. “He wants to talk. He comes in peace, for God’s sake. Don’t shoot!”

The warrior woman glances across at Pappagallo, who shakes his head and holds up his hand, his meaning unmistakable that she should hold her fire. From the watchers in the compound, there is a moan, a quick rush of talk, as the six figures strapped to the marauders’ vehicles are recognised.

From below Max, the mechanic cranes himself up on his framework until he is dangling beside him able to see over the wall at the convoy which has now come to a halt just short of the causeway.

“Matt . . . Mongo,” the mechanic mutters, counting with quick, jerking movements of his head. “Five . . . six . . . yeah, all there. Not one of them got through. Not a single one.”

Big Rebecca is crying. The quiet man has his arm around her shoulder, comforting her. The engines of the marauders’ vehicles on the other side of the wall are still revving.

Perched on top of the Humungus vehicle, a guy dressed in long floppy clothes waves his arms in a cutting out gesture, and all the motors stop running as if they have been switched off with a single key. The crimson Mohawk has seen Max, recognises him. The guy on the top of the Humungus vehicle is making an announcement.

“Greetings from the Humungus. The Lord Humungus, the warrior of the wasteland, the Ayatollah of the Rock and Roller.”

He bows and with the exaggerated gestures of the toady, indicates his masked master who is now rising in his seat, and whose voice booms and echoes through the two loudspeakers mounted to the roll cage of his vehicle.

“I am greatly disappointed,” the mighty Humungus begins, slowly, deliberately, so that the meaning of his words is not lost on the people who are listening to him in the compound. “I am told you wish to take your gasolene out of the wasteland.”

There is an interruption, this time from the second of the two victims lashed to the front of the Humungus machine. “Shoot!” he cries defiantly, this bruised and bloodied figure. “Shoot! While you have the chance.”

But the toady has leapt down from the top of the Humungus, dancing around, light on his feet, the court jester, the court toady and lickspittle who now sinks his fist deep into the defiant victim’s stomach, taking all the wind out of him.

The all-powerful Humungus continues. “You set out this morning to find a vehicle—a vehicle strong enough to haul that fat tank of gas.” A harsh laugh. “What a puny plan.”

Suddenly, there is a quick, darting movement across the wasteland as a rabbit breaks cover. Calmly, the crimson Mohawk swings in the saddle, and lets fly a bolt from his crossbow. The aim is true, unerring. The rabbit falls dead. The toady sprints across to the animal, and picking it up, holds it aloft in a gesture of triumph, of invincibility.

“You see! There is no escape. Not for anyone, or anything. The Humungus rules the wasteland . . .”

“Don’t give them the gas.” The defiant victim has recovered his wind. “Blow it up! Blow us all out of this hell hole!”

This time it is the crimson Mohawker who silences him, who leaps off his motor-bike, and bending forward until he is almost doubled, charges and bashes his head into the defiant victim’s stomach. He keeps butting the defiant victim with his head until he is unconscious. The other victim lashed to the bull bar, quite broken, sobs uncontrollably.

Then there is another disturbance, from a new quarter, when the feral kid leaps up out of a rabbit hole just outside the compound walls, and yelling incomprehensibly, lets fly with his chrome boomerang. The projectile whizzes past the crimson Mohawker’s shaven head, circles, and returns to the kid, who reaches up to catch it in his steel-plated mitt. There is a loud roar of laughter from the marauders. Bracing himself, the kid draws the boomerang back and lets fly with it.

This time it seems as if the boomerang flies very slowly through the air. It curves upwards, then to one side, appearing to come down in a series of levels. It might, to those people watching it, seem as if it

were travelling very slowly, but in fact it is travelling very fast. Then it is coming in at a level, straight for the crimson Mohawker who ducks his head just in time as the missile whistles past him with less than an inch to spare. Then, immediately, there is a wet clunking sound as something stops it.

The crimson Mohawker had been quick enough to duck out of the way of the boomerang with the razor-sharp edge, but the golden youth has not been so lucky. In less than a second, the youth of him, the beauty, the sensuality, the promise, have come to an abrupt end with the boomerang that has buried itself in the side of his head. The blood wells, then begins to pour out from beneath the boomerang as he slowly topples from the back of the motor-bike with a serene expression on his face.

The howl that is loosed by the crimson Mohawker when he has seen what has happened to his lover, is unreal, unearthly. It tingles the spine. In the compound, the defenders ready themselves for the attack they are sure must come as soon as the marauders recover from the shock of what has just happened.

“Oh, shit,” the mechanic mutters beside Max. “Here’s trouble.”

In unbearable anguish, in raging fury, the crimson Mohawker hurls himself on top of the dead youth, grasping, clutching, tugging the boomerang out of the youth’s skull, then screaming obscenities, his rage and bewilderment knowing no bounds, he hurls the boomerang viciously back at the feral kid. The weapon whistles low across the ground, and the kid throws himself back down into the hole long before it reaches him. Whistling close above the point where the kid disappeared, the boomerang begins to curve back towards the thrower. It looks as if it will lose its impetus before it gets there, and drop to the ground—well short of the crimson Mohawker.

But now the toady comes bounding forward in long springy lopes that lift him off the ground so that he looks as if he lacks gravity, that he is running on a moonscape.

“I’ve got it! I’ve got it!”

And then he is leaping effortlessly into the air, his outstretched hand reaching for the spinning boomerang and closing around it. To those who are closely watching the manoeuvre, it might seem that a number of tiny stumpy objects are flying through the air, which is

very strange because there had been nothing there before. Then the toady has fallen onto his knees, and is looking in surprise, then dismay at a hand that has suddenly become fingerless. When the marauders realise what has happened, a ripple of laughter runs through them.

The crimson Mohawker is caressing the dead youth, hugging him close to him, crying out, pleading, exhorting, as if the youth could be harried back to life. Then, with a bellow of rage, he throws the youth away from him, and leaps up onto the Humungus vehicle. He hits the ignition, and the big engine revs ferociously.

“Enough talk!” he screams. “I’m going in.”

Suddenly, before he can get the vehicle moving, a pair of powerful arms have grabbed him from behind, lifting him bodily from the seat. Then the Humungus reaches over and cuts the ignition.

“Not the way to do it, Wez,” he hisses, still holding the Mohawker in a vicious grip. “I know how you feel, I understand. We’re always losing someone. Now be still, my dog of war. Leave it with me.”

“Losers wait,” Wez growls, his body rigid with hatred, with the need for revenge.

“Do it my way.” The Humungus coaxes, appeals to reason and patience. “Fear is our ally. You’ll see. You’ll still have your revenge, but later.”

It seems Wez is paralysed. His lips move, but nothing comes out. The Humungus, Grand Inquisitor, Master of the Vermin, reaches forward past the immobile Wez, and flicks on the PA system. He picks up the microphone, and speaks into it, almost caressingly. His voice lifts and carries across to the compound.

“There has been too much violence . . . too much pain. None here are without sin.” Almost sorrowful, then brightening, offering some hope. “But I have an admirable compromise. If you listen to me, you will hear the wisdom of what I have to say.” A pause to allow these generous words to sink in, then, “Give me your gasolene, and I will spare your lives. Now what can be more reasonable than that? Walk away from here—that’s the chance I am offering you. I will give you safe passage through the wasteland. Just walk away from here, and there will be an end to the horror.” Holding Wez back against the seat, the Humungus turns on the ignition, and swings the vehicle to face the way it had come. “I’ll give you time to

decide," he cries. "One full day. That's all you have. One whole day."

From the compound walls, they watch as the Humungus leads his horde of marauders back to the rise over which they had emerged only a short time before. With an air of concentration, Max is working on the lock of the manacles with a small file he has managed to produce from his pocket.

Leaving a trail of blood from his fingerless hand, the toady staggers across to Wez's bike, and tries to start it. Finally, with his one good hand, he manages to get the machine started, then weaving, swaying, somehow, miraculously, keeping himself upright, he follows the procession as it disappears over the rise. A tow truck swings in and stops beside the body of the golden youth, which is unceremoniously dumped into the back by the two Skinhead marauders who have been despatched to collect it. As the convoy rumbles away, the feral kid darts out of his hiding place to retrieve his killer boomerang, then scurries back to his hole. The quiet man looses an arrow after the retreating marauders, but it is more a gesture than anything else, and the arrow falls well short.

"We'll never walk away," he says quietly, bitterly, "Never!"

The big woman, Rebecca, puts her hand on his shoulder. Her eyes are red with weeping. "You fool! It's our only chance." She turns to the others. Max is still quietly working away on the manacles with his file. Rebecca appeals to the crowd. "It's so simple—isn't it? We trade the gas for our lives."

The warrior woman doesn't agree. She shakes her head. Her eyes are flinty. She is a true amazon. "No. We've worked too hard to give up now. I say no, we stay."

Another man steps forward. He has powerful, dirt-ingrained fingers. "If we walk out of here, they'll slaughter us. They'll turn us loose and run us down for sport."

"How can you be sure of that, Zetta?" Big Rebecca demands. "The only thing you know about is farming." She looks past him to the crowd that is pressing in around her. She has an audience, this large woman, and she plays up to it. She raises her voice. "Don't listen to them. It's bad enough the lunatics are running the asylum. Don't let 'em throw away the key."

Other voices take up the challenge. People are shouting over each

other, trying to make themselves heard, and in the meantime, while the argument rages, Max is forgotten. He has managed, with some deft fiddling, to unlock the manacles. With a small but pleasing click, the lock has sprung open, and now one manacle is hanging free from his wrist. Beneath him, now that the danger has passed for the time being, the feral kid has emerged from his hole, and is carefully wiping his boomerang. From his pocket, Max takes out the hurdy-gurdy he had found on the bloated corpse of the rig driver, and turns the handle. The first few notes of *Happy Birthday* tinkle out. The feral kid looks up curiously. Max turns the handle faster. The kid grins. He likes it. Max plays it even faster, and the kid laughs. Max slips the hurdy-gurdy back into his pocket. The kid returns to his boomerang.

Close by, the argument is still raging between the people who want to take up the Humungus' offer, and those who want to stay. Angry voices carry throughout the compound. Then the curmudgeon is pushing his way through the crowd, packed and ready to go, carrying a gladstone bag, a bundle under the other arm, an ancient World War II helmet on his head, and in a straight line on his chest, a row of tarnished medals with faded ribbons.

"I'll talk to this Humungus. It will be all right." He makes a wheezing sound. "He won't hurt an asthmatic old man."

The lusty girl is by his side, her breasts firm and ripe, nipples pushing against the thin fabric of her shirt. The mechanic dangles above her. "I'm sure they'll find a use for you," he tells her. "Oh boy."

The lusty girl shrugs this off. "I'd rather be on my back alive, than on my back dead."

"He promised us safe passage," Big Rebecca points out. "He gave his word."

"And just suppose he keeps it." It is a new voice, strong, commanding, and all eyes turn up to Pappagallo standing on the battlement above them. "Suppose he keeps it, and we walk out of here with our lives? What happens then? Have any of you—those of you who want to take up his offer—have you thought about what's likely to happen then? Do we just spend the rest of our days wandering the wasteland? Do we become savages . . ." he gestures towards the marauders' camp; his body looks to be packed with tension . . . "just like them?" His hand drops, and his voice loses

some of its harshness as he goes on.

“Sure, it’s tough. I know it’s tough. But do you think we’re the first men since the world began to face brutality of some sort or another? To be afraid? It’s happened before—of course it has. And now that it’s our turn to make a stand, what do we do? Do we sink back into the Dark Ages? Is that what you want? You didn’t want that once.”

“Don’t listen to him!” someone shouts from the crowd. “He’s pissing in the wind.”

Pappagallo holds up his hand for silence. He is determined to be heard. “I made one mistake, and that was that I thought we could survive here. But now I know we can’t. But there’s one thing we shouldn’t forget.” Compellingly, he points to the fuel tanker that is propped up next to the cracking plant. “That’s more than just a tank of gas, you know. That oil is our lifeline to a place where we’ll be beyond the reach of these vermin on machines. That tanker will take us to a place where we can start all over again.”

There is a murmur of protest. One voice rises above the others. “That’s two thousand miles away, so what do we do—drag it there?”

Pappagallo nods grimly. “If we have to—yes. There’s always a way. But the first step is to defend the fuel. I won’t surrender it to anyone. I’ll leave them nothing. That I promise you!”

Big Rebecca gives a contemptuous snort. “Words!” she exclaims. “Just words. You’re going to die—for a dream.”

“Wrong!” The warrior woman brandishes her bow, her expression defiant. “We’re going to fight for a belief. I’m staying.”

The lusty girl’s shirt is open all the way down to her navel, revealing the smooth inner flanges of her breasts almost to the tips. “I wish it had worked,” she says with sadness in her voice as she stares up at Pappagallo. “You’ve all been really good to me. I’m sorry . . .”

She moves across to where the curmudgeon and Big Rebecca are standing, so aligning herself with one of the two divided groups that are beginning to form. The mechanic’s assistant begins to push the mechanic’s contraption towards the group, but the mechanic, convulsing that part of his body that is functioning, grabs hold of

the catwalk with his powerful hands and refuses to budge. The assistant shrugs, and walks away, and it is the quiet man who wheels the mechanic across to the group that has formed itself around Pappagallo. Of the two groups that have formed, Pappagallo's is the smaller. The majority of the camp is ranged against him.

"Hey!"

Their faces turn up to the battlements from where Max has called down to them. When he sees he has their attention, he goes on.

"Two days back I saw a vehicle that would haul that tanker. So, if you want to get out of here, you'd better talk to me."

Five minutes later, Max is inside Pappagallo's tent, facing the camp leader across a cluttered desk. With them are the warrior woman, Big Rebecca and Zetta the farmer. The mechanic listens in from the doorway. It is a high-powered meeting. Major decisions are about to be made.

"That's my offer," Max is saying. "I deliver a prime mover to you, and you give me back my car and as much gas as as I can carry."

Zetta the farmer is looking doubtful. "We lost eight good people this morning," he says. "What have you got in mind?"

Ignoring him, Max looks straight at Pappagallo across the desk. "I need five gallons of diesel and a gallon of high octane."

There is a brief quizzical silence, which Max breaks by saying, "Think of it as a down payment."

The warrior woman makes a disbelieving sound. "And that will be the last we'll ever see of him."

But Big Rebecca shrugs offhandedly. "What have we got to lose?" she asks.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The night is heavy, very black, as Max moves silently out of the camp, squeezing out through a hole in the wall, then taking the pole with the four jerrycans of gasolene secured to it. He hoists it up over his shoulders. His boots have been wrapped in rags. Soundlessly, with the dog at his heels, he moves off across the bridge of wrecks that had been put there by the Mohawk bikers the previous day. From the camp, he is watched until he is swallowed by the darkness.

The heavy load on his shoulders is weighing him down as he steps up out of the ditch. He is well out of range now of the searchlights that rake the wilderness from the compound. Ahead of him, some distance away, the marauders' campfires flicker against the night sky. Cautiously, Max moves close to them over the uneven ground. Laughter and shouting drift across the dark treacherous space that separates Max from the nearest of the fires.

It seems to take an age, creeping across the rough ground, with the weight of the cans pressing him down, before he reaches the first of the fires, which he then begins to skirt, keeping well into the shadows. In the red dancing gleam of the firelight, he can see one of the victims strung up to a beam by his wrists which have been tied behind his back. So he is suspended there, in great pain, moaning incomprehensibly, while the drunken marauders taunt him, prod him. Close by to him, a Mohawk biker has his arms around two camp followers, fondling them. A Gayboy Berserker hones his knife on a whetstone, spitting on it, and rubbing the knife back and forth on the stone.

Suddenly, as Max inches forward, his foot comes down, and there is nothing beneath it. He trips and stumbles, and as he pitches

forward into an erosion ditch, the jerrycans clang together. Hearing the sound, the Gayboy Berserker stops honing, and listens attentively, the knife held at the ready. Standing beside Max, the dog's upper lip draws back over its teeth in a silent snarl as the Gayboy Berserker lifts himself from his haunches and moves out to the edge of the camp, his eyes searching the darkness. He moves closer to where Max is lying in the ditch.

Then, abruptly, from close behind Max, there is a loud and sharp barking sound. Max looks up and sees the feral kid squatting on a rabbit warren, his head back, barking then howling like a wild dog. On the other side of the ditch, with the light of the campfire behind him, the Gayboy Berserker mutters a curse, then picking up a stone, throws it in the direction from where the barking had come. With another curse, he turns and stomps back into the circle of firelight. The feral kid beckons Max to follow him.

The kid is moving in and out of the darkness in front of him, Max and the dog make their way towards the edge of another ditch, well away from the campfires, the laughter, the shouting, and the occasional scream. Here the feral kid stops, and points into the darkness ahead, indicating with a broad grin the direction Max should take. Then, swinging away, he runs quickly back into the darkness.

The night is full of sounds, and slinky movements. As he moves forward, Max's eyes and ears are alert for any out of the ordinary noise. The sky is getting lighter. It will soon be dawn, and already shapes are beginning to take form and loom up at him out of the darkness which is imperceptibly greying. Ahead of him is the outcrop of rock from the top of which he had looked down at the compound for the first time, and where he had left the gyro captain tied to a tree. The pole across his shoulders feels as if it is digging right into his flesh from the weight of the jerry cans. Not far to go now before he can put them down and rest a while, get his breath back.

Perhaps he sensed something was wrong before he actually reached the top. It was too quiet, too still, and now standing at the top of the outcrop, he can see that what he had possibly been harboring as a suspicion, becoming stronger as he neared the top, is confirmed now as he looks around, and takes stock. He sees the empty dog food can and the freshly dug hole where the tree stump had been. He smiles grimly, and shakes his head as he sees the heavily scored trail that leads down the hill from the far side. At least, he won't

have any trouble tracking down the fleeing gyro captain, still chained to the tree.

The sun is up, and Max is already beginning to feel its heat deflected sharply from the dazzling expanse of a clay pan, when from a crest at the edge of the pan, they see the captain, about 100 yards ahead, staggering as he drags the weight of the tree stump behind him. The dog growls. The captain, hearing it, stops, then when he sees Max on the crest, picks up the log and begins to run in curious abbreviated lopes that throw him from side to side, across the clay.

Of course, carrying the weight of the stump, he doesn't have a chance. He has gone only a few more yards when his long legs give out beneath him, and he collapses in a heap on the ground. It takes Max only a few minutes to catch up with him. He eases the pole with the jerry cans down from his shoulders. His muscles are aching, his neck is stiff.

"You didn't really think you could get away, did you?"

The captain is panting, and there is a look of resignation in his eyes. "I nearly made it, though," he says breathlessly. He raises one hand, and points vaguely, "Over there, beyond those dunes . . . not too far away. Oh shit, why did you have to happen along *now?"*

Max keeps the gun pointed at him. "Come on, we've got things to do. We can't sit around having a chat. Now to get you loose from that tree trunk—that's the first thing."

As he speaks, Max works on the manacles. They click open, and the gyro captain massages his wrists which are red and raw, all the skin having been worn away from them. Small clusters of blood drops have formed on the abraded flesh. Max indicates the pole and the jerry cans.

"You carry it."

The heat is scorching. Their feet sink heavily into the sand as they climb over the dunes. The gyro captain is talking, muttering to himself, a torrent of words that don't make much sense. They trudge through the sand. The captain is bent forward beneath the weight of the jerry cans.

Then they are at the crest of the first dune, and below them, as they had left it, is the gyrocopter. The kite that had first attracted Max to

the machine is no longer in the air, but lying face down on the sand. Just beneath them, on the slope of the dune, the body of a marauder lies in a contorted position, and it's not difficult to work out what has happened, why the marauder is lying there dead. The story can be seen in all its simplicity, tracked out there in the sand, the footprints and the tyre-tracks of the buggy he had been riding when he had happened across the gyrocopter. Leaving his buggy, he had scrambled down the opposite dune to the gyrocopter, then while he was unsuspectingly checking it out, the snake had got him. The footprints show that he had staggered around in circles for some time as he tried to get back to the machine, to find help, before he slumped face down in the hot sand.

The captain gives a whoop, as he and Max quickly make their way down the slope to the gyrocopter. The captain slides in the sand, but manages to keep his balance. His smudged, unshaven face is broken apart by a broad grin.

"I knew it," he cries. "Christ, how I knew it. Lethal, these snakes. No bullshitting with them. Dead lethal . . . hah. Born killers. The snake's fangs, my brains. Lethal, I . . . oh no, oh shit . . ." he finishes weakly, staring down at something on the ground beneath the gyrocopter.

Coming up beside him, Max sees that it is the snake, dead, its triangular head squashed to a pulp. The captain lowers the load from his shoulders, then picking up the snake, begins to skin it with the knife he has taken from his pocket. He glares at Max with red-rimmed eyes.

"Don't you think you're gonna get any of this," he growls. "Because you're not. It was my snake. I found it, and I trained it. Now I'm gonna eat it."

Keeping the gun trained on the captain, who continues to peel the skin away from the snake with his knife, Max kneels down beside the marauder's body, and proceeds to go through his clothes, systematically, pulling out a necklace of spark plugs, bolts, teeth, and two old shotgun cartridges.

"Whatcha get?"

Without answering, Max picks up the two shotgun cartridges. One of them crumbles apart in his hand. The other is dog-eared, and remains intact. The gyro captain watches him as he breaks open the

shotgun, and pushes the dog-eared cartridge into one of the empty barrels. The captain's eyes widen.

"You bastard," he growls. "That gun was empty all the time, jesus, how low can you get? That's really dishonest."

Max nods towards the gyrocopter, but the captain stays where he is, keeping a wary eye on the shotgun. "How do we know it's not a dud?"

Raising the gun, Max pulls back the hammer, and uncertainly, not willing to take the risk, the captain moves across to the gyro.

Max uses one of the cans to fill the gyrocopter's tank. The three remaining cans he straps into the machine, then as the captain starts the engine and the rotor begins to turn slowly, settles himself onto the chassis, trying to make himself as comfortable as he can with the dog on his lap. A flurry of sand whips back from beneath the idling propellor, as the captain opens up the throttle to give the machine maximum power. Then, unaccustomed to the extra weight, the gyro lumbers across the sand, and awkwardly, a little lopsidedly, rises into the air.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

After a lot of work, adjusting and tinkering, the road rig is finally ready to move. The tank has been filled from the remaining cans, and the engine is running smoothly. Even the bandana he has tied over his nose and mouth is no proof against the sickly sweet odor rising from the bloated, fly-blown corpse of the driver that lies in the mid-afternoon sun. Max has tried to ignore it, but it has been almost impossible. Once he has got the engine going, he detaches the prime mover from the rig, and moves it clear.

Also with a cloth over his nose and mouth in a vain attempt to keep out the stench, the gyro captain has been chained to the rig to keep him out of the way while Max works on the engine. He looks up at Max who is in the cabin of the prime mover with the dog, revving the engine, ready to go.

“What about me?” he wails. “Aren’t we partners?”

Max delves into his pocket, then throws a set of keys down into the dust near the captain’s feet. “Make your own arrangements,” he shouts above the noise of the engine, then without waiting for further argument, eases the prime mover back onto the road, and with his foot hard down on the pedal, hurls it down the long, empty highway. The rig rattles and vibrates, the road is swallowed up beneath them . . .

Chasing down the highway, a long time ago, Max was a pro, the best there was, they said. The Nightrider was heading towards him, and the Nightrider knew who he was, that Max was out to get him. Max had waited, keeping his eyes on the curve of the road around which he knew the Nightrider would come screaming at any moment, calmly counting the seconds. Even when he saw the

battered, pirated cop car hurtle around the bend about a mile away, his face betrayed no sign of emotion.

Then the two cars were approaching each other with a collision speed of two hundred miles an hour, and at that speed there was no room for either timidity or miscalculation. It was a battle of nerves; neither of them was prepared to give way. It was a suicidal course.

When the two cars were less than a heartbeat away from each other, Max threw his wheel to the left, corrected slightly, then let his roo bar clip the door handles from the side of the Nightrider's vehicle. Then, with practised expertise, as cool as anything, Max swung his car into a 180-degree slide, and with the rubber burning from his tyres, came around less than forty yards behind the crazy.

The two cars thundered down the highway, sliding into a long, sweeping curve, and it was obvious that Max couldn't be shaken off. Max was too alert, too attuned for every minute change in speed and position. Duck, weave, brake and accelerate—it was as if the two cars were being controlled by the same driver. Locked together, they roared up the hill, pistons overworking and every nut and bolt being tested to the limit of endurance—and beyond.

The Nightrider couldn't have noticed the man standing just below the crest of the hill, waving his arms in a desperate attempt to get the two cars to slow down. Maybe by then, if he had seen the man, the Nightrider wouldn't have cared.

Max saw the man, and instinctively hit the brakes, and with the tyres searing into the tar, came to a screeching halt just past the top of the rise, just in time to see the roof of the Nightrider's car sheer away as it hit the tray of a semi-trailer jack-knifed at an angle across the road. The car was opened up like a sardine can as it plunged beneath the metal beams of the road train, then, smashing into a set of multiple wheels at the far side of the tray, what was left of the car simply disintegrated.

For the Nightrider it had been the end; for Max just the beginning. Now he is racing through this eerie, twisted country back to the compound with the prime mover he has detached from the abandoned road rig. This is the present. The Nightrider belongs to the past, as Jessie and Sprog belong to the past. To get the prime mover back to the compound, the engine running as good as new.

Reaching the crest of the hill, he can see the pinnacles surrounding

the camp away in the distance. He glances at the shotgun on the seat next to him, then pushing his foot right down again, barrels down the road towards the camp. Suddenly, he is aware of another sound rising above that of the engine, a spluttering, coughing sound that seems to be coming from above him. Without slackening speed, Max puts his head out of the open window and cranes upwards to see the gyrocopter coming over the rise behind him, spluttering and coughing, almost out of fuel by the sound of it.

He is driving fast. The hot gritty breeze whistles in through the broken windscreen. The marauders must have heard him coming already, and are probably getting ready for him, laying traps for him—but that doesn't matter, he has to get through, back to the compound, he has to keep his end of the bargain. The rise immediately in front of the compound is just ahead of him. Only a few more minutes now. The gyrocopter is hovering above him, swinging this way and that.

Suddenly, there is a dune buggy swinging in across the rugged terrain behind him, drawing up alongside the rear tyres of the prime mover. There are two Smegma Crazies in the buggy. The passenger takes aim with his crossbow, and an arrow thuds into one of the tyres, which with a loud, rending report, explodes, and as the vehicle rocks and swerves, Max has to use all his strength to bring it back onto the road.

Immediately ahead of him, a bike and sidecar swoop out onto the road from behind a clump of bush. In the sidecar is the familiar figure of the Mohawker with the crimson thatch, Wez, but the prime mover is bearing down on them like a juggernaut, giving them barely any room to move. The huge bull bar strikes the bike and sidecar, shunting them back from the road, and hard into the rear of a tow truck set up on blocks, beneath which one of the skinheads is flat on his back, making repairs. The bike and sidecar cannon into it, knocking the blocks out from beneath the truck, which crashes down on top of the skinhead mechanic. In the rearview mirror, Max has a quick, fleeting impression of twitching legs and settling dust, and then the bike and sidecar coming around in a tight circle, the rider's boot prodding the ground in a series of quick jerks as he brings it round.

The gyrocopter hovers just above Max, keeping the same speed, and keeping well out of the marauders' range. The captain is yelling down at Max.

“Watch . . . your tyres . . . turn . . . left . . . come on, you can do better than that.”

The bike and sidecar are coming up parallel to the prime mover’s rear wheels on the driver’s side and suddenly there is another sharp explosion, as Wez fires an arrow from his forearm crossbow into the tyres. Max feels the truck sliding again. He wrestles with the wheel to keep it steady.

Then, ahead on the rise, he notices for the first time, the Humungus machine, and the two victims strapped to the front being fed now by one of the marauders—fed to be kept alive, to provide sport, for no other reason. And the Humungus himself, the masked titan, is opening an ornate wooden box that has obviously recently been polished. He takes out a .44 magnum with a seven-inch barrel and a telescopic sight. It seems to Max that he picks out a bullet with particular care, and slips it into the chamber.

In the mirror, Max can see Wez on his feet in the sidecar, delicately poised to leap from it onto the back of the prime mover, then he does leap, scrambling onto the truck, just as it reaches the top of the rise.

Below him is the camp. Max hauls on the air horn lanyard, and as the screeching, hooting sound of it rolls away across to the compound walls, Max can imagine the flurry of activity that will be released by this sound, orders shouted, the gate opened, and the defenders staying by with their weapons ready for anything. The dog has retreated under the passenger’s seat.

But between Max and the momentary safety of the compound, there is still the Humungus—the almighty Humungus, standing there, in front of the truck, feet planted firmly apart, huge and as steady as a rock, implacable, a solid barrier. The Humungus is standing directly in front of the truck, raising the magnum to his shoulder, taking aim . . .

Max reacts by pure instinct. Guiding the truck with one hand, he picks up the shotgun and shoves the barrels through the broken windscreen, aiming them at the bulk of the Humungus, and pulling back on the triggers—and nothing happens. There is a fizzing sound, a faint pop, but otherwise nothing happens, and Max knows for sure now that the cartridge he had placed in there had been a dud one. The Humungus is still aiming the magnum. Max ducks, at the same time pulling hard down on the wheel. There is a flash

from the barrel of the magnum as the Humungus fires. The big gun kicks, and a split second later, the front of the prime mover seems to burst apart to release a mass of hissing steam and a spray of hot oil. The bullet the Humungus appeared to select so carefully must have smashed into the engine block at least.

The big machine careers off the road, slipping and sliding as Max desperately tries to keep it under some sort of control. In its reckless progress down the hill, it ploughs into a makeshift tent, ripping away the canvas, and there is a brief impression of two naked bodies, locked together, frozen . . .

The truck rockets down the slope. The causeway leading into the compound is only a few hundred yards ahead now. He could make it, he could easily make it, if . . .

Then, suddenly, something has snaked in through the driver's window, wrapping around Max's throat, pressing, crushing, and Max can hardly breathe. He is conscious only of the acrid smell of sweat, the powerful clenching muscle of the forearm that is clamping his throat, a leather gauntlet . . . His eyes mist over. The image wavers. He is only distantly aware of the face and shoulders leaning in through the window, the crimson topnotch . . .

He hears the dog snarling, and then, through his dimming vision sees the bared teeth sinking into the leather gauntlet. His attacker curses, and the pressure eases from Max's throat. Max's vision clears. The crimson Mohawker's arm lifts, and with a series of startled yelps, the dog is sailing out through the open window. Max slams his elbow into Wez's face, trying to push him away from the side of the truck, but Wez hangs on. They yell at each other.

The truck jolts and slides down the hill. A dune buggy, with a four-pak crossbow mounted like a machine-gun on its bonnet, swoops in across the slope. Four bolts are fired into the tyres into the driver's side of the prime mover. With the exception of one tyre, they all blow out, and the truck lurches to one side. On one side the dune buggy keeps abreast, then on the other, a two-engined assault car comes into view. The driver, who is the sole occupant of the assault car, is half-turned on his seat, yelling to the others who are now ranging up behind them.

"The gate's open. I'm going in!"

It seems the dune buggy has the same intention. None of the

vehicles slacken speed. The prime mover is riding on the rims of most of its wheels, the tyres streaming away in shreds from behind them. Max desperately tries to push Wez away from the window, but Wez won't budge. He is clinging on like a limpet.

The gyro captain is still there, above them, banking, swooping low, veering away again, doing everything he can to hold back Max's pursuers, throwing things down at them, the two empty jerry cans, the chains with which Max had bound him, anything he can find.

"Don't lose it now!" he screams down to Max. "We're almost there!"

Max has almost reached the causeway. Not far to go now, no more than a few more yards. The gyro captain has little left to throw—only what he has been saving as a last resort, and now it looks as if he has no alternative but to play this trump.

The four-pak buggy surges up again to the wheels on the driver's side of the truck. The crossbow has been reloaded, and the Smegma Crazy is taking careful aim at the last remaining tyre. Once that has gone . . . The gyro captain, seeing what is about to happen, plays his trump. Reaching into a sack, he draws out two wriggling, writhing snakes, and keeping their jaws clamped shut, kisses them fondly, maybe a little sentimentally, and hurls them down into the four-pak dune buggy below.

His aim is good. The snakes land where he intended them to land, right in the vehicle, dead centre, one of them falling between the driver's legs. Puzzled by what he can suddenly feel there, he reaches down, pulls it up to look at it . . . then screams as the angry disoriented snake buries its fangs into his wrist.

The buggy is swerving out of control, lifting, turning, up over the back of the prime mover, and then coming down with a clash of wrenching, tortured, buckling metal onto the street racer, and locked together, both vehicles swerve and topple into the ditch below the compound walls.

In the cabin, Max smashes his elbow into Wez's face again and again, but Wez only grins at him, his nails scoring into Max's neck and cheek, drawing blood. Max steers the truck onto the causeway, at the far end of which the bus has been drawn back to leave the way free for him to get into the compound. Wez is still hanging on, still grinning. Max's foot is pressed right to the floorboards. The prime mover rattles over the causeway of wrecked cars, and

through the opening into the compound. As soon as he is through, the gate closes, but not before the assault car and the four-pak buggy, which have come up out of the ditch, have also made it inside. The dog, which has been chasing after the prime mover manages to reach the safety of the camp through the rapidly closing gap with only a second or two to spare.

A street racer, which has been in hot pursuit of the other vehicles, doesn't make it. Skidding to a stop outside the closed gate, the driver looks up at the wall to see a flame-thrower being aimed at him from the top. The driver yells and slams the racer into reverse, but not quick enough to avoid the torrent of flame that engulfs it. Black smoke billows thickly up from the retreating vehicle.

Inside the compound, the prime mover slides to a halt beneath the catwalk that joins the cracking tower and the cooling plant to the generating hut. With great agility, Wez swings up onto the roof of the prime mover, and from there leaps up onto the catwalk, crouching low, moving back along it towards the wall. The two marauder vehicles that have followed Max into the compound, screech to a halt. In addition to Wez, there are now four marauders inside the camp. Max jumps out of the prime mover to assess the situation.

Outside the compound, under the direction of the Humungus, about a half-dozen marauders are surging up the causeway on foot to the gate. On the wall, standing at the very limit of the battlement so as to have a better range, Pappagallo aims the flame thrower with which he has driven off the street racer that is still burning, and looses a sheet of flame. The marauders stop, and edge back. One of them fires an arrow at the figure on the wall.

Pappagallo doesn't see the arrow coming. He has glanced quickly over his shoulder to see what was happening in the compound, and the arrow, quivering as it strikes bone, pierces the upper part of his thigh, catching him unawares, by surprise, and suddenly there is a searing pain in his thigh, and he is tumbling backward, arms waving, crashing to the ground below with such force that all the breath is momentarily jolted from his body.

On the catwalk, Wez is yelling to the four other marauders who have managed to breach the defences of the compound.

"The gate! The gate! Open the gate! *Mo-o-oove!"*

Max hears the cry, and looking round, sees the four marauders heading towards the gate, which, if they reached it unhindered, they would open to allow the Humungus' hordes to come streaming in, and it would be all over for Pappagallo and the defenders of the camp. Then, suddenly, as they are sprinting towards the gate, there is a thud, and it is as if the shaft of an arrow has suddenly sprouted from between the shoulders of one of them. He staggers, throws up his arms, and pitches forward onto his face.

Up on the cooling tower, the quiet man reloads his bow. Wez, spinning around to see where the arrow has come from, sees him. In the heat, his crimson topnotch looks like flames.

Below, Max makes a long, low tackle, and brings down another one of the running marauders. They roll in the dust beneath the pump. The dog barks. The feral kid is dancing on top of the pump, gleefully looking down as a group of the defenders rush in with a variety of makeshift weapons, and as Max moves out of the way, on his feet and running towards Pappagallo who is lying winded on the ground, they descend on the helpless marauder. The third marauder is brought down by the mechanic, swinging out at an almost horizontal angle from his complex of pulleys and winches, while his assistant mans the other end of the lattice-arm contraption.

Up on the cracking tower, Wez and the quiet man face each other. The quiet man is not a killer, but Wez is. The quiet man has his bow drawn right back. Wez waits, his eyes quick, his body tensed. The quiet man releases the arrow—and it misses. It is just what Wez has been waiting for. Catching the quiet man off guard, he leaps forward, his shoulders hunched, his head low, and rams it up into the quiet man's face. Blood streaming down his face, the quiet man reels and staggers. Wez butts him again, then again. The quiet man can't move. There is blood everywhere. Wez pushes him off the cooling platform. The quiet man lands heavily on his back, twists and writhes in agony, obviously very badly injured.

Below, the last marauder has made it as far as the bus, but no further. Smashing one of the windows, he is hoisting himself up onto the ledge when, from inside the bus, Big Rebecca plants her foot squarely on his face and shoves him back. The warrior woman finishes the job by leaping agilely down from the battlement and plunging a knife blade into his neck.

With the flame-flower he has scooped up from beside Pappagallo, Max is climbing the battlements. Outside, a larger number of

marauders are coming along the causeway to make a fresh onslaught against the fortress. Tongues of flame leap down at them from the flame-thrower Max is aiming. They retreat.

Moving like a panther, Wez, the crimson Mohawker, grabs a cable and swings from the catwalk across to Pappagallo's tent, and sliding down the canvas slope, sprints across the ground to a small pile of old tyres. Leaping up onto the tyres, he trampolenes from them onto a storage tank, from where he jumps onto the tanker of fuel. He looks around for a way to get to the gate, and now finds himself stalemated as the whole camp, spotting him, alerted by the shouts of others, turns to face him. It won't be easy for him now to reach the gate.

Then the gyrocopter is coming in at an angle, hovering low, heading straight for Wez, forcing him to duck as it swoops down to land in the centre of the compound. An arrow flies into the air close to Wez, reaches its apogee, seems to hesitate for an instant, then drops uselessly to the ground. A steel-edged boomerang whistles past the Mohawker's head, and there's no chance for him now to get to the gate, to open it to allow the others in. Running along the top of the tanker, Wez leaps over the barbed wire at the top of the wall, a massive vault that takes him right across the wall and into the ditch below, where he lands on his hands and knees. Scrambling up onto his feet, he climbs up over a wrecked car, and sprints off into the wasteland to rejoin his fellow marauders.

In the camp, the gyro captain is the man of the moment. He is the centre of attention, and relishing it, looking heroic, shaking hands with people who come swarming up to him, making a speech.

"Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. Just doing my job, that's all. No need to go overboard about it. Hands off the machine, please. Don't want to damage it."

The feral kid, hovering at the edge of the group, seems to find this amusing. The curmudgeon comes up to the captain, a sly look on his face.

"Tell me, son. This machine of yours . . ." speculatively eyeing the gyrocopter. "Takes two people, does it?"

The captain is watching the lusty girl who is idly running one hand along the machine. "Yeah . . . well . . . possibly." The lusty girl smiles at him in her warm provocative way, and encouraged, he

moves to her side.

“Okay, okay, let’s go.” A voice of authority. Pappagallo’s voice.

He is propped up against some sacks at the base of the battlement, bleeding badly from the arrow wound in his thigh. Big Rebecca is applying a tourniquet to his leg, while Zetta the farmer is patiently working the arrow free. Pappagallo’s face is contorted with pain.

“We leave tonight. Load the vehicles.”

The mechanic is examining the prime mover’s engine. “How is she?” Zetta calls across to him.

Bodies are being removed, vehicles are being loaded, and there are men working on the tanker. The mechanic lifts his head out from under the bonnet. “She took a slug in the guts. Through the radiator into the timing case cover. Chewed up the teeth in the timing gears . . .”

Zetta is having some trouble working the arrow free. “What the hell does that mean?”

“About twenty-four hours.”

“You’ve got twelve.” Pappagallo’s face is shining with sweat. He yells through the pain. Zetta looks up at him.

“It’s in the bone,” he says quietly. “Gonna have to cut you.”

The quiet man has been taken to the van which is the makeshift medical centre. The warrior woman makes her way up to the battlement where Max is standing. “Look, I want you to know,” she says in a subdued voice. “I read you wrong. I misjudged you. You came through.”

With a shrug, Max moves away from the flame-thrower to the ladder, and climbs down it. When he reaches the compound, people begin to crowd around him, smiling at him, offering their congratulations, offering their hands. The feral kid steps forward and holds out his hand. Max takes it. The kid laughs and skips away. Hands slap Max on the back, someone brings him a bowl of food. Big Rebecca steps forward.

“It’s a day too late for my Nathan,” she tells him. “But for the rest of us, you’ve given us back our hope. Thank you. And welcome.”

There is a rumble of approval from the listening crowd. Max turns to face them. “Let’s get it straight,” he tells them gruffly. “I’m leaving. Tonight—and alone.”

He walks away from them towards the black-on-black, the nose of which is protruding from the workshop. The crowd watches him in surprise. The feral kid follows him. Suddenly, there is a yell from the battlements, and Max is forgotten for the time being. An ominous drumming sound comes from beyond the walls of the camp.

The marauder horde has gathered on the rise again, beating a frightening tattoo on their vehicles. As the camp people watch solemnly from the catwalk, two poles are ceremoniously raised, and nailed upside down to the poles which are slowly being brought to the vertical are two of the victims that have been captured that morning. The victims are screaming. The lusty girl trembles, and the gyro captain puts one arm around her shoulder.

“I know you’re afraid,” he says, squeezing her a little in a gesture that is meant to be reassuring. “But I’ll let you into a secret, sweetheart. I’m afraid, too.”

She nuzzles closer to him, and looks up into his eyes. Her breasts are so round, so firm. “Our problems must look awful small from up there,” she says in a small voice.

The captain smiles, and squeezes her again.

And then, at that moment, sparking out across the barren landscape that separates them, that other voice, the dreaded voice many times amplified—the voice of the Humungus.

“This is the end—do you hear me? The end. No one will get out of there alive!”

## CHAPTER NINE

It is a waiting game. The glow of the marauders' fires flickers against the night sky. The tattoo continues to beat out. The Humungus' voice drones on and on, monotonously, reciting dire descriptions of death over the intervening distance. A waiting game, a war of nerves.

The camp is bustling with activity. The mechanic's team are working on the prime mover and the tanker, briefly silhouetted in the showering sparks and the flash of arc welders. Another group are attaching metal aprons around the wheels of the tanker, a barbed wire fence along its sides and defensive shields at the front and rear, making it impregnable.

The yellow bus and the other camp vehicles, including the captured lone wolf vehicle, the dune buggy and motor bike are being loaded. Bathed in the strong glare of the camp searchlight, the burnt-out wreck sits in the centre of the causeway.

Away from the lights, the gyro captain and the lusty girl make their way through the tent area towards the gyrocopter. The captain is carrying two jerry cans, the girl is weighed down with her hastily grabbed belongings, dropping pieces behind her as she scrambles after the captain. Her face mirrors her indecision. Abruptly, she stops, and clutching her belongings to her, looks back at the people she is leaving behind. The captain walks back to her.

"What's wrong?"

Her mouth works, but no words come. Tears well up in her eyes, and she turns away. "It's okay," the captain says softly, persuasively. "You can tell me."

The words come now, with difficulty. “It . . . it’s . . . all wrong . . . sneaking away . . .”

“I thought you *wanted* to go.”

“I did.”

“You were scared, frightened . . .”

“I am. Terrified.”

“So what are we waiting for?”

She turns back to him. Her eyes are still brimming, and now there is a touch of defiance in her expression. “This is shabby. They are my family . . . the only people I’ve got, and I can’t leave them—not now.” She reaches up and touches him lightly on the face. “I’m sorry.”

Picking up the things she has dropped, she makes her way back to her tent. For a long moment, the gyro captain stares after her, then turns towards the gyrocopter. He takes a few steps, then stops and looks back in the direction the lusty girl has taken. He curses softly but pungently, then making up his mind, follows the lusty girl.

In the pyramid-shaped workshop, Max is working on the black-on-black. A small siphon pump is transferring fuel from a 44-gallon drum into the pursuit car’s tanks. Hearing a noise, Max looks up to see the curmudgeon leading Pappagallo, who is limping heavily, into the workshop. Behind them, sparks fly and lights flicker from where the mechanic and his team are working on the prime mover.

“See!” the curmudgeon cries out in triumph, pointing a finger at Max. “What did I tell you? He’s leaving.”

Pappagallo’s leg is heavily bandaged. His face is pale, and his eyes are shining. He hobbles up to Max.

“I don’t have time for speeches,” he says. “I need you to drive that tanker.”

Max shakes his head. “I’m leaving. We had a contract. I did my job. End of story.”

“We’ll make a new contract.”

“Not interested. I got all I need.”

“I can offer you a future. We can rebuild our lives.”

“You gotta come, sonny,” the curmudgeon breaks in excitedly. “Look.” From his pocket, he takes out a grubby souvenir postcard pack, which he unravels in front of Max’s face. It bears the heading *Greetings from the Sunshine Coast.* “This is where we’re going. Two thousand miles away. Bloody paradise. Fresh water, plenty of sunshine, and nothing to do but breed . . .”

With another shake of his head, Max returns to the engine of the black-on-black. “No, thanks.”

“What is it with you?” Pappagallo demands, and when Max doesn’t answer him, “Come on, what are you looking for?” Max still doesn’t reply. Pappagallo grips his shoulder.

“Nothing,” Max says reluctantly.

Pappagallo is standing very close to him. “You happy out there? Wandering, one day blurring into the next so that you can’t tell them apart? Look at yourself. You’re nothing—a scavenger, a maggot . . .”

Max moves away, and Pappagallo follows him. “Tell me—what’s your story? What burnt you out? Kill one man too many? Seen too many die? Did you lose someone?”

Two bodies on the road, the sound of the motorbikes receding into the distance. Max looks away. Pappagallo catches the involuntary flicker of the other man’s eyes. “Is that it? You lost someone.”

Max pushes past him. He doesn’t want to talk, to think. But Pappagallo is on to something. He is like a terrier with a bone.

“So what? You think that makes you so special? You think you’re the only one who has suffered? It’s happened to all of us here. We all have our reasons for being here, our own stories, and none of it is very pretty. But no one has given up. We’re still human beings, struggling, dreaming . . . But you—you’re a dead man.”

With a gesture of disgust, Pappagallo turns and limps to the door, followed by the curmudgeon. Max watches them go, then with a shrug, slides under the car, where, connecting a string of wires and fuses to the switch box and then to the fuel tank caps, he re-arms the booby trap.

He has almost finished when, suddenly, there is a thud on the roof of the car. Max brings himself out from under the car, and stands up. Inside the car, the feral kid has thrown his belongings into the back, and is settling himself in the dog seat. He has found the hurdy-gurdy, and is turning the handle. The tinny notes barely make an impression in the silence. Max looks up at the maze of pipes in the peak of the pyramid. The kid must have been hiding there all along.

Max opens the door of the car, and reaching in, grabs hold of the kid and lifts him out. Throwing his head back, the kid howls and struggles. Max throws him out of the door, then picking up the kid's kit from the back of the car, tosses it out after him.

"Go on!" he yells. "Get out! Scat!"

They let him go. They can't stop him, and no one makes any attempt to do so—certainly not Pappagallo, who sits behind his imposing metal desk in the huge tent in which he lives, works and makes his plans, and watches Max's car as it passes the open entrance to the tent.

"Why let him go?" Zetta the farmer queries. "Why give him back the vehicle?"

There is an egg timer on the desk. Pappagallo toys with it. "He is an honourable man. He fulfilled the contract."

"Then who's gonna drive the tanker?"

"I will." Pappagallo flicks the egg timer, and watches the sand drain through the narrow glass waist.

Max has drawn the bus back from the entrance to the camp, and is walking back to his vehicle. He is about to start the engine when the gyro captain materialises from the shadows, followed by the lusty girl. The captain leans in through the open window of the car.

"Look, I don't agree with them. I don't reckon you're a coward, but I do say you're making a big mistake." He smiles tentatively. "You can't split up a great team. You and me together—we're unbeatable."

Max nods grimly. "I'll see you around. Goodbye, and good luck."

Starting the engine, he guns the motor, and a few seconds later, is

through the gate, which closes behind him.

## CHAPTER TEN

In the marauders' camp on the rise above the compound, Wez the crimson Mohawker, his face covered in a white powdered war paint, springs to his feet. He has heard something, a sound that is unmistakable, and his eyes strain into the darkness. He begins to run. A Gayboy Berserker runs with him. They run to the Humungus machine. The Humungus himself is sitting on a rock near the victims who have been tied to the poles, his great hunched bulk silhouetted by the flames of the camp fire. When he hears the engine of his machine spring into life, he jumps to his feet just in time to see the vehicle heading off down the slope. It is a sight that displeases the mighty Humungus.

The defiant victim and the broken victim are still strapped to the front of the Humungus machine. The toady who has been sleeping on the fuel tanks sits up with a start, bewildered by what is happening. Dawn is already creeping up from the east, and in the dim light, it can be seen that the black-on-black, chased by a tow truck and two dune buggies, has already reached the road and with the supercharger reaching a high whine, is speeding away from the compound.

The Humungus machine, with Wez and the Gayboy Berserker, is coming down to the road at an angle, which will put it between the black-on-black and its pursuers, and its great reserves of power will ensure that it keeps to the lead, just behind Max, will steadily gain on Max. As they draw up to the black-on-black, Wez shouts to the Gayboy Berserker, who, in response to the order, slides in beneath Wez to take over the wheel, while Wez clambers forward onto the front of the vehicle. The roar of the two vehicles is deafening. Buffeted by the wind, Wez holds on to the vibrating framework of the machine. The Gayboy Berserker reaches down beside him, and

rests his hand on a toggle switch next to three gas bottles marked "Nitrous Oxide", while, in front of him, Wez grabs hold of a huge exhaust pipe that juts into the air. Impervious to the fierce heat of the pipe, he wrenches it away from its mounting, then signals to the Gayboy Berserker. There is a mighty roar matched by a massive surge of power in the Humungus machine as the Gayboy Berserker flicks down the toggle switch. The two victims at the front of the machine scream. Max looks back to see what is happening, then is visibly startled when its massive acceleration brings the Humungus machine alongside the black-on-black. As it leaps forward, Wez, balancing right at the front, swings the chrome pipe down through the broken windscreen of the black-on-black, right into Max's face.

As the pipe hits him, and all sorts of things start going off inside his head, Max's car slews across the road, smashing side-on into a series of four guide posts. Wood splinters and is flung high into the air. The car spins in a full circle, dirt and stones slicing up from beneath its locked tyres, then rolls down the embankment, over and over, knocking against rocks and tree stumps, coming down on its side, on its roof, the wheels buckling beneath it, glass smashing—and then, finally coming to rest upside down among the boulders of a dry creek bed.

Max is slumped upside down in his harness, his face and body bloodied and broken. For a long moment, there is an awful silence with only faint echoes of bumping, grinding metal and breaking glass rolling across the valley, then something moves inside the car. Whimpering a little, the dog pulls himself out of the wreckage. It licks and paws at Max's face. One of Max's eyes flickers open.

Wez stands at the rim of the gully while the Gayboy Berserker and the toady, carrying jerry cans, scramble down to the wreckage. "Don't waste him," Wez calls after them. "If he's alive, I want him."

By the time the two marauders reach the wreckage, Max has, by a massive effort of will, freed himself of the harness and crawled free through the window of the car. It is the Gayboy Berserker, some minutes later, who peers into the car and discovers that Max is no longer there. While the toady taps the fuel tanks, he scans the rocks and boulders looking for some sign of Max. The toady looks up from the fuel tanks, and shouts in triumph to Wez.

"Another victory, O mighty Wez. The tanks are full—and it's all yours."

The Gayboy Berserker is moving slowly along the creek bed.

“And for those who toil in your service, perhaps a thimbleful.”

The Gayboy Berserker stops. Ahead of him, he sees a pair of legs protruding from behind a boulder. He hears a growl, and turning, sees the snarling dog between him and Max. The dog’s hackles are raised, its sharp teeth are bared, ready to attack. The Gayboy Berserker raises his crossbow, and fires at the dog. He smiles to himself in grim satisfaction, and moves on toward Max, just as the toady prises the cap away from the black car’s fuel tank, by so doing connecting the circuit and sparking the booby trap.

Just before the explosion, there is a moment of curiosity, when hearing the sound of the connection being made, the toady bends forward to investigate. But he doesn’t have a chance to find out what it was that had made that faint scratching sound. The explosion is immense. The blast of it throws the toady back. It rips him apart. Farther along the creek, the Gayboy Berserker is picked up and carried along by a huge ball of fire. Debris showers down on Max behind the boulder. A pillar of fire reaches up into the sky and spreads outwards. Wez returns to the Humungus machine.

Max slips in and out of consciousness, struggles to hold on, to stop it drifting away from him. Things swim in and out of focus. Blood and sweat trickle into his eyes, stinging them. Flies buzz and cluster on his wounds. His mouth is parched. He looks up at the sky, where the sun is climbing. The wasteland dissolves in the heat haze. There is a sound, but he can’t be sure—not a sound, maybe a vibration, a throbbing in the air. The heat throbbing . . . no, a sound, something dark, a speck in the sky—a speck that grows steadily larger, the beating drumming heat, blackness creeping in again—a dry hot wind blasting down at him, and then nothing . . .

Then, later, some time later, with everything shaking around him, the beat of an engine rivetting into him, jarring his bones, and he can’t move because something is strapping him down, a familiar voice is saying, “See? I told you we was partners.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Happy birthday, tinkling notes coming from somewhere close by. Happy birthday to you . . . to who? The notes sound distorted, each of them like a dum-dum bullet exploding inside his head, as he fights to keep hold of his returning impressions, to put himself into some sort of context. Little things at first, the song, *Happy birthday,* and he can't move his arm, and his focus, becoming clearer all the time, he turns his head, wincing at the stab of pain the effort costs him, sees that it is in a sling. There are other bandages. His leg is bandaged. He lifts his head, and this time the pain is not so sharp. A pair of small feet dangle in the air in front of him.

He is lying in the back of a van, and through the open rear doors, he can see that he is back in the compound. He can see the catwalk and the cracking tower, and the tanker, which now has a cow-catcher on the front, armor-plating on the bonnet, steel aprons on the wheels, and a net of barbed wire along each side. It is already hooked up to the prime mover. The other vehicles are packed and ready to go. There is a crowd of people in the centre of the compound.

The gyrocopter. That was how he had been brought back to the camp. They must have seen the smoke of the explosion from the camp, and the gyro captain had come to fetch him. The music stops playing, and the dangling feet are replaced by the grinning upside down face of the feral kid. In the centre of the compound, Pappagallo is addressing the assembled camp occupants. His voice carries across to Max in the medical van.

"You all know what to do. You all know your positions. I'll be driving the tanker."

Wearily, Max lets his head drop back onto the pillow. Then, conscious he is not alone in the van, turns his head to find himself looking into the bruised bloated face of the quiet man who is lying in a stretcher supported by a number of 44-gallon drums. Max lifts himself again. He has to get out of here, and quickly.

In the compound, Pappagallo is pacing up and down, still addressing his flock.

". . . we're gonna crash, or crash through. We'll have to use the tanker to punch our way out of here. That will give the rest of you a chance. So don't hesitate. Split up. Go as hard as you can."

The feral kid, wrapped in all his animal furs, comes into the van, and watches Max struggling to haul himself out of the vehicle. He picks up Max's equipment belt, and hands it to him.

"Two hundred miles north," Pappagallo continues, "there's a bridge. At Powder River. If we make it, that's our rendezvous. Give us until sunset. If we haven't made it by then, keep going."

Beyond him, the mechanic has managed to get himself up into one of the two defence positions on top of the tanker. Now he is exchanging angry words with his assistant and the warrior woman who plainly doesn't think this is such a good idea.

"Good enough for me to build it," he shouts down at them, "but not good enough for me to ride. I sweated blood on this mother, and no bastard's going to tell me to go in no lousy bread van."

Kicking his framework contraption of wires and pulleys away, he settles in behind the steel plate of the defence position. No one, it seems, will move him from there.

Max has managed to get himself out of the van. Grim-faced, and with blood seeping through the bandage on his leg, and followed by the feral kid who is carrying his kit over his shoulder, he limps towards the group in the centre of the compound. One by one, as they become aware of his presence, their murmuring dies away, and they turn to silently watch him approach. Max stops, and swaying slightly on his feet, stares at Pappagallo. He is feeling quite weak.

"If it's all the same to you," he says, "I'll drive the tanker."

Pappagallo shakes his head. "The offer's closed. Too late for deals."

But Max is adamant. “I’m not looking for a deal. I want to drive that tanker.”

Pappagallo is looking at him closely, assessing him. “Why?”

Max moves close to him. “Take my word for it,” he growls. “I *have* to drive that tanker.”

“Look at him,” Zetta the farmer shouts from the watching, listening crowd. “His leg—he can’t even change gears.”

“That’s right.” Pappagallo nods thoughtfully. “You’re a mess.”

“I know,” Max says sombrely. “But I’m the best chance you’ve got.”

Pappagallo studies Max for a long moment, then with a shrug that might suggest he has no real choice in the matter, hands Max back his shotgun and six fresh cartridges. He turns to face the crowd.

“Wind ’em up!” he calls to them. “Let’s get on with it.”

The pump has stopped. The vehicles are brought into position. Outside the compound, the marauders have formed an arc beyond the causeway. At the centre of this arc is the Humungus machine, with the Humungus behind the wheel, one end of a short metal leash wrapped around his fist, the other end of which is attached to a collar around Wez’s neck. The collar bites into Wez’s neck, as, with teeth bared, he strains at the leash like a wild animal that has just been captured. The two victims lashed to the front of the machine have their heads hooded.

Pappagallo has taken over the lone wolf vehicle. He is wearing a gauntlet crossbow taken from one of the marauders who had raided the camp with Wez, and is pulling on a helmet as Max walks past him to the tanker where the mechanic’s assistant, a harness fixed around his waist and shoulders, is perched on the running board. He will be riding shotgun. Beyond the tanker, the gyro captain is warming up his flying machine.

Max climbs up into the cabin of the tanker, where the feral kid is sitting in the passenger’s seat with his belongings between his feet. Max picks him up and hands him out to the warrior woman who is just about to climb on board.

It is time to go. The break-out is about to happen. Max kicks over the big engine of the tanker, steadily pulling on the power. The

engine roars, is deafening. Pappagallo starts the lone wolf machine, and Big Rebecca opens the bus-gate.

The huge vein throbs at the back of the Humungus' head. He has loaded the revolving chamber of the magnum .44 with the remaining four bullets from his case. He is ready.

Inside the compound, Pappagallo gives the signal. He nods to Max and flicks down the visor of his helmet. Max puts the tanker into gear, and it gives it all the power it is capable of mustering. On the causeway beyond the open gate is the burnt-out wreckage of the marauder machine.

The tanker breaks out of the compound first, with the lone wolf machine close behind it. The tanker ploughs into the burnt-out wreckage, knocking it off the causeway into the ditch. The Humungus raises his weapon, and takes aim at the oncoming tanker, which is putting on even more speed as it thunders across the causeway. Behind it, the gyrocopter swoops low over the wall of the fortress and heads for the arc of marauder vehicles in front of the causeway. Leaning out of the machine, the captain drops three lighted petrol bombs on one end of the line of cars below. They fall on and around a street racer, which, with a great whooshing sound, explodes into flames.

In the tanker, Max bears down on the burning street racer. The lone wolf machine is close behind him. In his path are two bikes and a dune buggy. The Humungus has the tanker squarely in the sights of his magnum now. He fires.

The bullet strikes the protective plate mounted on the front of the tanker, denting it, but causing no damage other than that. With the sound of crumpling, tearing metal, the tanker ploughs into the two bikes, crushing them beneath its massive wheels. The Humungus fires again, and there is another dent on the plate. The dune buggy is desperately trying to get out of the way of the charging tanker but is not quick enough. The tanker hits it, smashes it, and hurls it to one side. The Humungus fires his third shot, and again the result is no more than a dent in the plate. The tanker hits the burning street racer, and shoves it contemptuously to one side. Max has broken through the cordon.

The gyrocopter has circled and is coming in again. The captain has more bombs to drop. He leans out of the aircraft, holding the bottles.

The Humungus sees the gyrocopter coming in low, and raising his gun, takes quick aim and fires. The bullet pierces the right rudder pedal. The gyro captain yells and looks down at what is left of his right foot, now no more than a mess of blood and gore.

Max has reached the road. He sees the gyrocopter banking away towards the horizon, then behind him, coming over the rise, the Humungus vehicle in the lead, the marauder horde after him in hot pursuit. They are already harrying Pappagallo in the lone wolf machine. Held on by his harness, the mechanic's assistant is firing arrows at the pursuers who are steadily gaining on the tanker. On top of the tanker, the warrior woman and the mechanic are preparing to fire their own weapons. At the rear, Zetta the farmer is holding a petrol bomb, ready to throw it into the marauders as soon as they come within range.

From the compound, the remaining vehicles are already spreading out into the wasteland. Some of the marauder vehicles spin out to chase them, and others peeling away from the main chase, are heading back to the camp in the quest of what loot they might find there. Two of the vehicles are already inside the compound, screeching to a halt in the centre, when suddenly the world caves in, everything turns black, there is a massive flash, then a series of rolling explosions, debris raining down a great distance around the camp that the departing defenders preferred to destroy, along with everything they had been unable to take with them, rather than leave to the mercy of the Humungus and his army of vermin. Black smoke billows thickly across the sky.

The pursuers have caught up with the tanker, swarming around it like flies to a piece of rancid meat. Leading them are a tow truck fitted with a four-pak, and two street racers. In his machine, the Humungus gives the leash a sharp tug, which pulls Wez's face up alongside his.

"Now. Go. Finish him."

He pulls the metal links of the chain apart. Tearing the collar away from his neck, Wez leaps from the Humungus machine onto the back of the tow truck which is running abreast. The tow truck accelerates and draws up to the tanker on the driver's side. From the top of the tanker, both the mechanic and Zetta the farmer throw petrol bombs down at the first of the street racers. The bottles smash on the bonnet, flames lick along the top of it, and then the car explodes. Swerving in front of the tow truck, it leaves the road

and crashes into another street racer on the wasteland below.

In the lone wolf machine, Pappagallo has been forced off the road, and is being chased by three marauders. They swing around the two burning vehicles. One of the marauders is shunting the lone wolf car ahead of it with a series of bangs and thuds.

The tow truck is drawing up on Max. As it creeps up into his range of vision, Max glances across to see Wez standing on the rear of the truck, swinging a grappling hook at the end of a long line, bracing himself, keeping his balance. And then he throws the hook, which snakes through the air towards the cabin of the tanker. Max ducks as the hook comes in through the open window of the cabin, and catches on the door. The tow truck swings away from the tanker, and the line tightens. The tow truck brakes to a sudden halt, and the door comes away at the hinges, leaving Max an exposed, vulnerable target. The door bumps along the ground in a cloud of dust.

A dune buggy comes up past the tow truck to the slipstream of the racing tanker. The Smegma Crazy riding shotgun is on his feet, also twirling a grappling hook. Crouched down behind his plate, Zetta the farmer fires his crossbow at the Smegma. The arrow flies through the caged window of the four-pak street car and lodges in the driver's helmet. The driver pulls off the helmet. The arrow has barely creased his scalp.

With all his strength, the Smegma Crazy hurls his grappling hook up at the tanker. Zetta sees it coming, but is not quick enough to get out of its way. The hook catches him by the leg then wedges on the lip of the back plate. As the line snaps taut, Max feels the sudden jar, and accelerates. With this increased and abrupt strain, the rivets on the rear plate give way, and the whole block including the aprons protecting the rear wheels comes away. The dune buggy, with the sudden release of pressure rolls off the road.

Behind the top plate, the mechanic has lit the wick of another petrol bomb, and is preparing to throw it. Just as his arm is swinging back, the four-pak on the tow truck swings up, and releases its deadly barbs. Three of them hit the plate and fall harmlessly away. The fourth hits the mechanic's throwing arm. The bottle drops and smashes on top of the tanker, and the flames spread slowly.

The back of the tanker is now left undefended. The Humungus

speeds towards it, at the same time reaching forward and pulling the hoods from the heads of the two hapless victims, so they can see the back of the tanker looming up at them.

Max's leg is bleeding freely through the bandages. He looks across at the mirror on the passenger's side of the cabin, then curses grimly when he sees Wez's convertible tow truck easing alongside the left rear bogie of the prime mover. Wez takes aim and fires an arrow into the first tyre, which explodes, and cable and rubber flail uselessly from the exposed rim of the wheel.

As Wez is reloading to take the next tyre, another Mohawker who has two bearclaw devices on his crossbow gauntlets steadies himself on the jib of the tow truck, preparing to jump onto the tanker.

The mechanic is fighting the flames from the petrol bomb that are now burning the padding behind his protective plate. He beats around him furiously. His clothes are already alight. The warrior woman, seeing him, rises to her feet. She sees the bearclaw Mohawker preparing to make his leap onto the tanker, and fires an arrow at him. The arrow strikes his protective pads, throwing him off balance. He swings out and grabs the barbed wire which has been strung up along the side of the tanker.

The warrior woman is running along the top of the tanker to where the mechanic is still desperately trying to put out the spreading, licking flames. Two marauders on the driver's side of the tanker fire arrows up at her. One of them hits the protective plate over her kidneys; the other plunges into her thigh. She staggers forward. Wez has reloaded his weapon, and fires up at her, his aim straight and true. The arrow plunges into her back, fair between the shoulder blades. She buckles forward into the line of barbed wire, and struggles helplessly to free herself from it.

Wez is reloading his crossbow again, when the lone wolf machine draws up alongside the convertible tow truck. The feral kid throws his boomerang, which strikes Wez on the crossbow gauntlet as he turns and raises it to fire. The driver of the truck, a masked Mohawker, turns his head to see what is happening, just as Pappagallo fires his gauntlet crossbow. The driver screams as the arrow passes through his neck, and the tow truck, now that he no longer has it under control, swerves and bounces off the highway, knocking Wez off balance. The bearclaw Mohawker, whose hands are clutching the barbed wire on the tanker, and until a moment before had his feet on the tow truck which was speeding alongside,

is left stranded, clinging to the barbed wire. Wez scrambles over into the driver's seat in an attempt to bring the careering vehicle back under control.

Bleeding badly, the warrior woman's clothing is caught in the barbed wire, and she struggles to keep herself from blacking out, to bring herself into an upright position, but that is quite impossible. She is hanging upside down from the barbed wire, her head perilously close to the wheels of the truck. Every time her clothing tears, she slips a little closer to the road.

The mechanic has managed to put out the flames, reaches down to grab her, and as his hands close around her legs, a street car swings in alongside her. Watching in the mirror, Max groans as a Gayboy Berserker fires another arrow into the warrior woman. She slips further down the side of the tanker, dragging the mechanic down with her.

Max is furious. The blood pumps angrily in his temples. Tearing the sling away from his arm, he grabs the shotgun from the seat next to him, then bringing it around across his body, lets loose both barrels at the street car. The first barrel blows the bonnet away from the vehicle; the second shatters the windscreen, killing the driver instantly and sending the vehicle in a crazy headlong rush away from the road into an erosion ditch.

By pushing the dead driver out of the way, and slipping in behind the controls, Wez has brought the tow truck back under control. In the lone wolf machine, Pappagallo draws up beside the tanker, which is roaring down the highway, with the bearclaw Mohawker hanging desperately onto the barbed wire along the side of it. From the four remaining cartridges bunched up in his bandana, Max picks up two and hastily reloads the shotgun.

The Humungus brings his machine up into the slipstream of the tanker. A Gayboy Berserker clambers over the front of the Humungus machine, and the two victims, and leaps onto the ladder at the undefended rear of the tanker.

On the other side of the tanker, a Mohawk biker with a pillion rider swings in alongside. Straining upwards, the pillion rider helps the bearclaw Mohawker swing up over the wire. Once he has managed to get to the top, the bearclaw Mohawker reaches down and hauls the pillion Mohawker on board the tanker. As the pillion rider swings upward, the biker accelerates to the leading set of offside

wheels, one of which has already been blown apart. He raises his bow and takes aim at one of the good wheels, but before he can release the arrow, the flying steel belt from the shredded tyre catches his arm, wraps viciously around it, and before he even has time to cry out, before he even knows what is happening, he and his bike are dragged beneath the rig. The giant wheels crush both man and machine out of all recognition and spit them out at the back, right under the wheels of the Humungus machine.

The Gayboy Berserker who has come up on the driver's side of the tanker, who shot the arrow into the stricken warrior woman, has made his way along the tanker, and now leaps the gap between the tank and the prime mover. Inside the cabin, Max hears the thump, and is puzzled by it. Directly above him, on the roof of the cabin, the Gayboy Berserker braces himself, and aims his crossbow down between his parted feet. He fires.

The bolt rips through the metal and buries itself in the seat between Max's legs. Max brakes sharply, and the Gayboy Berserker above him, who is preparing to reload his weapon, pitches forward, and falls past the windscreen and out of sight over the front of the tanker.

The Humungus is close behind the tanker. When the tanker brakes, the machine slams against one corner of it, crushing the broken victim who is strapped to the front.

On the roof of the tanker, the pillion Mohawker and the bearclaw Mohawker also lose their balance. The bearclaw Mohawker grabs hold of an outlet valve and steadies himself. But the pillion Mohawker isn't so lucky. As he scrambles to regain his balance, he reaches out and clutches one of the exhaust stacks, scorching his hand. He screams, lets go, and falls forward.

Max is staring at a speck that has suddenly appeared in the sky, coming in low towards him, materialising through the shimmering waves of heat, taking form. It is the gyrocopter, come back to join in the fight.

Pappagallo's lone wolf vehicle comes up parallel with Wez's convertible tow truck. The feral boy hands him a loaded crossbow. Glancing back over his shoulder, Wez sees him, and wrenches hard down on the wheel, shunting into the lone wolf vehicle. Pappagallo's arrow goes astray, and as the two cars collide, the feral boy loses his footing, and falls overboard. He lands heavily on his

side, but is not hurt. He scrambles up onto his feet again.

A bike and sidecar zoom up along the tanker's offside. Another tyre explodes, disintegrates, and the sidecar rider fires an arrow into it. From the top of the tanker the bearclaw Mohawker signals for a weapon. The sidecar rider throws him a large, powerful crossbow. Deftly catching it, the bearclaw Mohawker begins to haul himself onto the roof of the cabin. The sidecar passenger leaps onto the tanker. Max still has his foot down flush to the floorboards. He doesn't know where the next attack will come from.

From the Humungus machine, which has its nose almost touching the tanker again, a Smegma Crazy jumps onto the ladder at the rear of the tanker, and begins to climb.

Wez's tow truck and Pappagallo's lone wolf vehicle continue to shunt each other. The feral kid, hearing a sound behind him, turns and is alarmed to see a street car and a bike converging on him. He gulps and starts to run.

Wez's tow truck is heading straight for an erosion ditch. He brakes and swings the wheel, and locked together, both it and the lone wolf vehicle go into a slide. The machines come apart, and while Wez manages to get his tow truck around the ditch, the lone wolf machine's wheels teeter over the edge of the ditch. The machine comes to an abrupt halt.

Max is looking back to see what is happening. A hand comes up over the front bull bar, followed by the Gayboy Berserker's head. Seeing the bearclaw Mohawker, he signals for the crossbow. The bearclaw Mohawker throws it down to him. It lands on the bonnet with a clatter. Hearing the sound, Max swings back in his seat, and raises the shotgun, aiming at the Gayboy Berserker in front of him. The Gayboy Berserker ducks, and Max holds his fire, waiting for him to show himself again.

In the meantime, the bearclaw Mohawker is working his way towards Max's side of the cabin, and the Smegma Crazy leaps from the tank to the cabin roof. Max looks up as his feet hit the roof just above his head.

Suddenly, the window on the passenger's side of the cabin shatters. Max swings his head to see the sidecar rider raising his crossbow. Directly above Max, the Smegma Crazy braces himself as he prepares to fire a crossbow bolt down through the roof. In a quick,

instinctive movement, Max brings up his shotgun, firing the first barrel point-blank at the sidecar rider, whose face just seems to disintegrate as he is blown away. Without pausing, Max turns the shotgun up to the roof, and fires the second barrel, the blast of which hurls the Smegma Crazy off the back of the cabin roof.

There are only two more shells. Breaking open the barrel, Max is about to grab up the last two cartridges, when, suddenly, a powerfully muscled arm reaches in through the open space where the door had been. Max ducks and the cartridges fall uselessly to the floor. The bearclaw Mohawker's gauntlet rips the seat next to Max's right shoulder. Max swings the wheel from side to side, swerving the tanker in an effort to keep the Mohawker off balance.

There is a solid thud as the steel claw slashes into Max's shoulder padding. The tanker is still swerving from one side of the road to the other. The bearclaw Mohawker's foot slips, and Max cries out in pain as the claw becomes imbedded in his shoulder. The bearclaw remains there, unable to move. Max tries in vain to reach the two cartridges that are rolling around on the floor. At the front of the tanker, the Gayboy Berserker puts his head up for another look.

The back wheels of the lone wolf machine are spinning wildly, as Pappagallo tries desperately to pull it back out of the ditch. Then the wheels have caught, and the machine begins to move freely away from the ditch.

The feral kid is running as fast as small legs can carry him, trying to keep distance between himself and the bike and street car that are chasing him. Wez streams in behind them in his tow truck, and now there are three machines chasing the kid.

Just when it seems they are on the point of running him down, as if by magic a rope ladder appears in front of the kid. Without thinking, the kid grabs the rope and holds on tightly as the gyrocopter banks away, lifting the kid into the air just as the three machines pass beneath them.

Behind the tanker, the Gayboy Berserker who is manning the four-pak, looks up to see the gyrocopter and the kid dangling from the rope beneath it. Swinging the four-pak around on its axis, he fires. Three of the four arrows strike the underbelly of the copter, and something vital must have been hit, because suddenly the flying machine is making a terrible clanking noise. It dips sharply down towards the tanker that is being chased by the marauders below.

The kid clutches desperately to the swinging rope. He looks up, then looks down. They are dropping at an alarming rate.

Max struggles to free himself from the bearclaw that is imbedded in his shoulder so he can reload the gun. The Gayboy Berserker scrambles over the bull bar and reaches for the crossbow on the bonnet. With his free arm, Max takes hold of the rear view mirror, and wrenching it from its mounting, flings it at the Gayboy Berserker, who slips back again behind the bull bar. The crossbow remains on the bonnet.

The gyro captain struggles to keep his craft in the air. The kid is dangling right next to the tanker. Reaching out, he tries to take hold of the tanker's exhaust stack—but it is just out of reach. The gyrocopter drops again. The kid grabs the barbed wire, but he can't hold it.

Still wrestling with the bearclaw, Max is taken aback by the sight of the kid flying past the gap where the driver's door had been. Max pushes his arm out as far is it will go, and grabbing the kid by his loin cloth, hauls him into the truck. The kid lets go the rope, and both of them watch as the wildly bucking gyrocopter crashes to the ground.

Two more of the tanker's tyres have been hit. Max shouts to the kid, pointing to the cartridges that are rolling about on the floor of the cabin. When the kid has picked up the cartridges, Max hands him the gun. The Gayboy Berserker is crawling back up onto the bonnet in another attempt to reach the crossbow.

The kid tries to insert the first cartridge upside down. "Turn it around!" Max yells. "No! The other way!"

With both cartridges successfully inserted, the kid snaps the gun shut, then aims it at the Gayboy Berserker, whose fingers are just closing around the coveted crossbow, but he cannot find the trigger. The Gayboy Berserker raises the crossbow. Max tears the gun away from the kid, and fires. The Gayboy Berserker, blood gushing out of his chest, throws up his arms and disappears over the side. Max brings the gun around, and rams the barrel hard up into the armpit of the bearclaw Mohawker. He pulls the trigger, and the echoes of the second explosion roll heavily down on the first. The bear-claw Mohawker falls away, leaving behind his arm and the bearclaw gauntlet that is still buried in Max's shoulder.

Behind the tanker, the Humungus signals to the four-pak street car, which darts forward and looses its arrows. Two more of the tanker's tyres shred away.

The tanker shudders, and Max grimly tries to keep it under control. The feral kid climbs out through the smashed windscreen onto the bonnet where he retrieves the crossbow the Gayboy Berserker has dropped again.

"Hey you!" Max shouts at him. "Come back here, for Chrissake!"

The kid either doesn't hear him, or doesn't understand. Before Max can grab him, the kid has clambered up onto the roof with the crossbow. The tanker shudders again as another tyre goes. Glancing back through the rear window, Max sees the kid jump from the roof of the cabin onto the tanker. As he staggers along the top of the tanker, just managing to keep his balance, the kid tries to load the crossbow, but he is not strong enough to pull back the string.

Another tyre goes, then another. One of the bogies falls down onto the wheel rims, and the jarring motion causes the kid to slip down onto the wire on the blind side of the tanker. He drops the crossbow which clatters onto the road.

Pappagallo has got the lone wolf machine back onto the road, and is overtaking the main pack as he heads for the right-hand side of the crippled tanker. Wez's tow truck is coming up on the other side of the tanker, which with pieces of chewed rubber flailing everywhere, is slowing down despite Max's effort to keep up the speed.

The kid is attempting to climb back to the top of the tanker when Wez's tow truck swings up on that side. Seeing the kid, Wez fires, and the bolt pins the kid to the side of the tank by his dog skins. Tearing the skins free of the bolt, the kid tries to climb again, and this time, Wez's arrow pierces his arm, pinning it to the tanker.

Cursing, Max is trying with all his might to bring the crippled tanker under control. Pappagallo draws alongside in the lone wolf machine.

"Jump!" Pappagallo yells. "It's finished! Jump!"

Max is looking for the kid, but doesn't see him. The tanker is swerving, leaving the road and running up onto the embankment. Pappagallo takes the lone wolf machine up onto the high side of the

cutting just as the tanker sighs to a standstill.

“Jump!”

Max is still looking around him. “The kid?”

“Forget it! Jump!”

Max hesitates, even as the marauders swarm up onto the tanker. Pappagallo guns the engine. Making up his mind that he really has no choice, Max leaps out of the cabin, grabbing the rear roll bar of the lone wolf machine and fighting to swing his feet clear, only just managing to find a foothold as the vehicle, its wheels spraying dust, roars away.

On the tanker, Wez and a second Mohawker have reached the top as the Humungus pulls up next to it. Wez opens one of the hatches, and the second Mohawker plunges his hand inside. He gives an anguished cry, pulls out his hand, and looks disbelievingly at the small pile of sand in the palm of it.

Below, the Humungus has opened the outlet hose. Sand gushes out onto the road. Pinned to the tank by his arm, the feral kid chuckles in spite of the searing pain.

The second Mohawker gestures in disgust. “All this—for a handful of sand.”

Wez is pale with fury. “I know where there’s guzzolene,” he hisses.

“Yeah.” The second Mohawker gets the drift. He nods. Whirling abruptly, Wez fires his crossbow, and the arrow buries itself into the Humungus’ mask, and thus, quietly, without fuss, the great and mighty Humungus is carried off to what destiny awaits him. It is very quick. The Humungus doesn’t even make a sound of protest as he crumples to the ground, thoroughly dead.

The rest of the horde are arriving. As their vehicles screech to a halt around the tanker, two Smegma Crazies and two Gayboy Berserkers come running, yelling and whooping, waving jerry cans in the air, come for their portion of the tanker’s precious cargo. But they don’t know what the cargo has turned out to be. How could they know? How could they anticipate that Wez, the second Mohawker and three others who are already at the tanker, would suddenly whirl on them and fire their crossbows at them at a quietly muttered signal?

As the lone wolf machine speeds along the undulating highway, Max makes his way across the back engine towards Pappagallo. He notices that the bearclaw is still in his arm. He pulls it away, and drops down into the cockpit beside Pappagallo, who is laughing, almost hysterically, the sound rising even above the screaming engine. He turns to Max.

“We’ve done it!” he cries in sheer exultation. “I thought it would be impossible, but we’ve done it.”

“What about the kid?” Max shouts back at him.

But Pappagallo ignores the question. “We’ve won—don’t you see? The fuel’s with the others. It’s already at Powder River.”

Reaching across him, Max cuts off the engine, and the lone wolf machine rolls to a stop. Swinging in his seat, he grabs Pappagallo by the shirtfront, and pushes his face forward so that it is almost touching the other man’s.

“What happened to the boy?” he growls.

Pappagallo shakes his head. “We gotta keep going. It’s our chance.”

Max feels for and finds the bearclaw he has taken from his arm. He holds it to Pappagallo’s glistening face. “The kid?”

Pappagallo gulps. “I had to leave him. Nothing I could do.”

“You left him there?” The anger is rising in Max. Deadly anger. “With them? Alive?”

“He was pinned by an arrow to the rig. There was nothing I could do.”

Releasing Pappagallo, Max pushes him roughly out of the vehicle, and shifts across to the driver’s seat. Starting up the machine, Max swings it around in a half circle.

“You fool!” Pappagallo calls after him. “That’s part of the price. We can’t go back.”

Back at the tanker, Wez is sitting on top of the Humungus machine. There are only five of them left now. All the others have been slaughtered. The Humungus mask dangles from the roll bar like a trophy. They have all the gas they need from the other machines.

They drive away. Wez is crooning softly to himself.

“I am the Humungus—Warrior of the Wasteland.”

In the distance, coming over the crest of a hill, he sees Max coming towards them in the lone wolf machine. He grins.

Max guns the lone wolf machine over the rise, the superchargers screaming. The Humungus machine is coming towards him at a tremendous speed. The two machines are on a collision course. Max steels himself. Four hundred yards, three hundred . . . He can see it more closely now, see that the victims have been taken down from the front of the machine, and in their place . . . something small.

Then he sees what it is, makes out what it is, this small object, and his expression changes. It is the feral kid who is lashed there in place of the two victims—the feral kid lashed there in an upside down position.

Max hits the wheel and the machine goes into a slide that spins it clear of the Humungus machine, then one after the other, shunts away the two Mohawker vehicles that are flanking Wez. The remaining two marauders follow Wez. When the lone wolf machine has settled, and is back on course, Max guns the two supercharged engines and heads off after Wez.

The kid’s head is only inches away from the bitumen. Wez looks back over his shoulder to see that Max is already overtaking the two marauders behind him, bearing down on them, pushing them away, and then there are only the two machines now in the chase, the Humungus machine, and the lone wolf machine which is steadily catching up on it. The feral kid’s face is frozen in a mask of fear as the Humungus machine picks up speed, and more speed, passing through a puddle of water, through a flock of birds, past Pappagallo who is walking along the road.

Max is closing the distance, and as he draws up to the Humungus machine, comes up alongside it, he raises the bearclaw arm. Wez smiles because he still has something up his sleeve, something to use as a last resort. He reaches down beneath the dash, and his hand closes over the toggle switch next to the nitrous oxide bottle. He flicks the switch, and . . . ah . . . is forced back into his seat by the massive acceleration. The kid screams. He screams most desperately.

Max doesn’t have time to take aim. He just fires, and isn’t at all sure

where the arrow lands; just a last gesture which he knows is futile. The Humungus machine thunders away, and he doesn't have another chance.

Then as he watches the machine pulling away into the distance, he sees it entering into a wide curve of the road, but not taking the bend, just continuing on, out into the desert, through the saltbush, slowing, coming to a standstill. Cautiously, Max follows the Humungus machine, and as he comes alongside, he sees that Wez is sitting stock still behind the wheel, staring out at the desert beyond. It isn't until he is examining him more closely, stepping out of the lone wolf machine and moving close to the other vehicle, that he sees the tip of the arrow protruding from the crimson Mohawker's left eye—and in the front of the machine, the feral kid gasps great sobs of relief.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Powder River, and the convoy, led by the yellow school bus, moving out across the plain. Max watches it from the top of a hill, picking it up with his binoculars, the glasses ranging, following a trail of dust that moves in to intercept the column, stopping, focusing, and there it is, the twisted wreckage of the gyrocopter, its rotors gone, engine screaming as it bumps along to meet the convoy.

Max shakes his head, and walks back to the lone wolf machine on the top of the hill behind him.

And so they move out, the convoy, Pappagallo, the leader of the band, grim-faced, driving the yellow bus that had once served as the entrance to the camp he had established in the inhospitable desert, heading north, to a new life, a new order, a place in the sun, nurturing his vision of a new world. There would be hard times ahead of them—many hard times—but in the end, maybe, they would pull through, and the dream would become reality. And the kid is with them. The kid represents the future. One day . . . one day . . .

Max returns to the car. His body feels very heavy. He is alone. He will always be alone.